

# A Critical Engagement with N. T. Wright on Natural Theology

ANDREW TER ERN LOKE

*Hong Kong Baptist University*

[andyloke@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:andyloke@hkbu.edu.hk)

**Abstract:** N. T. Wright's important recent discussion of Natural Theology seeks to redefine traditional Natural Theology on Biblical grounds. I show that Wright's discussion neglects Biblical passages (e.g., Acts 14:14–17 and Romans 1–2) which imply that God has left 'witnesses' (Acts 14:17) in the natural order, and which contradict Wright's claim that people cannot start with the natural world apart from Christ and infer that God exists. Contrary to Wright, some contemporary versions of the arguments of Natural Theology do not entail 'classical theism' as Wright understood it but increase the plausibility of miracles and the Jesus of the Gospels.

**Keywords:** Natural Theology, History and theology, Problem of miracle, Classical theism

## 1. Introduction

N. T. Wright is a highly influential scholar in contemporary Christianity. After working on the historical Jesus for many years, he has recently turned his attention to Natural Theology, delivering the prestigious Gifford Lectures in 2018 and publishing a book titled *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (henceforth Wright 2019). In this book, Wright (2019, xi) claims that our current understanding of "Natural Theology" has been artificially shrunk. He argues that "Natural Theology" should include the Bible because the Bible was "written and edited within the world of space and time, by a large number of individuals situated in 'natural' communities and environments," and which "purports to . . . describe events within the 'natural' world" (xi). Moreover, Wright argues that "Natural Theology" should include Jesus of Nazareth because Jesus was a fully human being and therefore part of the "natural" world (3–4, 157).

In this article, I shall engage with Wright's view on Natural Theology. While I agree with Wright on many points in his book, I disagree with him concerning his claims stated in the previous paragraph. In support of his claims, Wright also offers a negative assessment of the arguments of Natural Theology

(Cosmological, Teleological and Moral Arguments) and argues that the arguments of Natural Theology entail “classical theism” and decrease the plausibility of miracles and the Jesus of the Gospels. I shall respond to the above salient points of disagreement in what follows.

The aim of this article is to point out a number of important weaknesses in Wright’s arguments, and to demonstrate that he offers an unserviceably revisionary account of Natural Theology that is also lacking in (indeed, contrary to) Scriptural warrant. I shall compare Wright’s account with my account of Natural Theology which refers to what can be known, rationally believed, and/or demonstrated<sup>1</sup> about God by observing and thinking about the natural world, without using the doctrines of a particular religion as premises.<sup>2</sup> Given that Wright is a Biblical scholar who seeks to redefine traditional Natural Theology on Biblical grounds, I shall begin by showing that there are biblical passages in Acts and Romans which actually contradict his case.

## **2. Two Important New Testament Passages: Acts 14:14–17 and Romans 1–2.**

It is somewhat surprising to note that, as a leading New Testament scholar, Wright’s discussion of Natural Theology in Wright (2019) is marked by a relative paucity of coverage of two important New Testament passages, viz. Acts 14:14–17 and Romans 1–2. I shall explain below that these New Testament passages imply that people can start with the natural world apart from Christ and infer that God exists (cf. Wright 2019, 191). This ability can be seen as a matter of God’s common grace rather than as an “epistemological version of Pelagianism” (cf. Wright 2019, 255).

To elaborate, concerning Luke’s portrayal of Paul’s preaching of the “good news” in Acts 14:15–17, verse 17 states “And yet He did not leave Himself

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<sup>1</sup> James Barr’s definitions of natural theology has been widely cited: ‘that “by nature”, that is, just by being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible (Barr 1993, 1). One problem with this definition is that the attempts of Plato et al does not merely claim knowledge or awareness but also evidence and demonstration (e.g., using the Cosmological Argument).

<sup>2</sup> The aim of this article is not to establish my own view of Natural Theology; a complete defence of my own view against every important objection throughout history (e.g., the objections by Karl Barth and continental philosophers) would require an entire book and is beyond the scope of this article. Likewise, the aim of this article is not to argue for the validity of the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral arguments; to do that and to provide a response to the problem of evil mentioned by Wright (2019, 10, 243) would require multiple monographs and would go beyond the word limit of this article. Thus, I can only refer readers to external sources (cited in the subsequent sections of this paper) where the arguments are defended in greater detail against objections (for responses to the problem of evil, see Loke 2022a).

without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). Regardless of whether it accurately represents Paul's own thoughts, this text belongs to canonical Scripture.<sup>3</sup> It affirms that God left "witnesses" of himself (Acts 14:17) in the natural order; the phrase "he has not left himself without a witness in *doing good*" (v.17a) indicates that the giving of rains from heaven and fruitful seasons (v.17b) is a testimony that reveals God's character as a good Creator (see the discussion on "revelation" below). This God is "the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them" (v. 15). He is distinct from the Greek pantheon, the "worthless things" which Paul urges people to turn away from (v. 15). Moreover, God's leaving of "witnesses" (a form of evidence) presuppose that (God had created) humans (who) have the intellectual ability to understand these evidences (the creation of humans [and all things] by God is mentioned elsewhere by the Lukan Paul in Acts 17:24–26), such that they are able to infer<sup>4</sup> the personal and moral character of God who does good things. This is said to have happened already "in the past" (v. 16) i.e. prior to their hearing of the Gospel concerning Jesus Christ.

Concerning Romans 1–2, the following verses are particularly noteworthy: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). In Romans 2:14–16, Paul extends to the Gentiles some prophetic promises (Jer. 31: 33; Ezek. 11:19–20; 36:26–7) about the divine law being written on the hearts of Israelites and enabling them to know, instinctively, what to do (O'Collins 2016, 199). The Greek term for "revelation" (*apocalyptein*, "to unveil") used in the context (Rom. 1:18) conveys the idea of removal of obstacles to perception. Another related Greek term *phanerōō*<sup>5</sup> (used in Rom. 1:19) conveys the idea of making clear, manifest,

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<sup>3</sup> Against those historical-critical scholars who question the portrayal of Paul in Acts 14:15–17, Craig Keener argues that 'the approach is more Pauline than scholars often recognize. Most of Paul's epistles address Christians; when we approach the texts, however, that exemplify his understanding of Natural Theology (Rom 1:19–22), idolatry (1:23–25; cf. 1 Cor 8:5–6; 10:20–21), and repentance from idolatry (1 Thess 1:9), the resemblance between Luke's Paul and the Paul of the epistles is substantial . . . Luke's Natural Theology is compatible with the Natural Theology in Rom 1:19–25 . . . In fact, in different ways, Acts 14:15–17 and Rom 1:19–25 might even draw on the same source in Wis 13–15 . . . Wisdom of Solomon used God's revelation in nature to make idolatry morally indefensible' (Keener 2013, 2158).

<sup>4</sup> While some testimonial knowledge gained from 'witnesses' is immediate (e.g., when somebody testifies to you he is in pain, you know immediately that he is telling you that), others require inference. For example, the rains and fruitful seasons mentioned in Acts 14:17 are not personal entities telling us in plain language that they were created by a good God, rather, they serve as evidence from which one can infer the existence of a good God.

<sup>5</sup> Moo (1996, 104n.57) notes that Paul often uses this term with fully as much emphasis on divine revelation as *apocalyptein*.

make known. The context (“For even though they knew God . . .” Rom. 1: 21) indicates that Paul is using these terms as success terms: revelation occurs only if something is shown (uncovered) *and* someone/some people acquire knowledge about the revealed object (This definition of revelation will be used in this paper). Nevertheless, the truth which is known (earlier) can be suppressed (Rom. 1:18) and becomes “unknown” (later) as people’s thinking becomes darkened due to the suppression of truth (Rom. 1:21b).

Regardless of whether Paul is addressing those who had already been confronted by the Gospel of Christ, Paul says that God’s attributes are “understood through what has been made”; he does not mention Christ or the Bible here. While Paul writes about “the Gospel” in Romans 1:16–17 which he identifies as “concerning his Son . . . Jesus Christ our Lord” in Romans 1:3–4, in Romans 1:18–31 Paul is explaining why humankind needs this Gospel: because they have been guilty of suppressing the truth (v. 18).<sup>6</sup> That is, the “divinely disclosed knowledge of God’s deity *from the creation of the world* (Rom. 1:20), which was already present long before the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ” (Pannenberg 2004, 75). This implies that “true knowledge of God is available in nature and that people *apart from God’s revelation in Christ* come to know this truth about God” (Moo 1996, 123). It should be noted that Paul does not speak of merely believing God, but knowing God – “For even though they knew (Greek *ginóskó*) God . . .” Rom. 1: 21). This substantial point remains valid regardless of whether (as Barth claims (1957, II/1, 119)) Paul himself argues for Natural Theology in Romans 1 on the basis of what he holds to be an antecedent revelation in the Gospel. Taken by itself, Romans 1 does not imply (though it is consistent with) the view that that people can start with the natural world apart from Christ and infer that God exists, since the knowledge referred to may be referring to innate knowledge (rather than inferred knowledge) of God (see the discussion below concerning *cognitio dei insita* and *cognitio dei acquisita*). Nevertheless, by affirming a form of knowledge that God has made available in nature *apart from his revelation in Christ*, Romans 1 does affirm General Revelation and Natural Theology in distinction from Special Revelation, and in this sense it offers support to what is presupposed by the implication of Acts 14:17. That is (as explained previously), the implication that there are ‘witnesses’ in the natural world from which people can infer (using natural phenomena and principles of reasoning, without requiring Special Revelation) that God exists.

Campbell (2009), who opposes to interpreting Romans 1 as Paul’s affirmation of Natural Theology, acknowledges that the Wisdom of Solomon is playing some role in the arguments of Romans 1:18–32 and that the intertextual relationship is strikingly extensive:

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<sup>6</sup> See my reply to Campbell’s (2009) objection below.

Wisdom of Solomon famously attacks pagan idolatry from 12:3 onward. Natural theology, and consequent pagan responsibility, are then emphasized at several points—in 13:1, 4, 5, and 9; also 15:11 (see Rom. 1:19–20). A progression to sexual immorality is then announced, as idolatry is equated with sexual immorality in 14:12, and this is made more explicit in 14:24. (Campbell 2009, 360)

Nevertheless, Campbell hypothesizes that the affirmation of Natural Theology in Romans 1:18–32 was not Paul’s; rather, Campbell attributes it to a “Teacher” in Rome (cf. Rom 16:17–19) whom Paul was opposing using sarcastic parody in Romans 1 (Ibid., 391).

While Campbell’s hypothesis is interesting, it has been rejected as implausible by many New Testament scholars, including Wright himself in his other writings. Wright rightly notes concerning the rhetorical device of *prosopopoeia* (where an author communicates to the audience by speaking as another person) that “the great classical examples of the phenomenon stand against him [Campbell], because there it is always obvious in the texts themselves that a new ‘speaker’, or at least a new ‘voice’, is being introduced and then answered” (Wright 2013, 197). But that is not the case in Romans 1:18–32. Moreover, “it is a serious objection to the case even for a ‘sarcastic’ reading that not a single one of the Greek Fathers appeared to get the point” (Wright 2013, 198). While Campbell claims that his view fits better with the overall theology of Romans, Wright and other New Testament scholars have argued that this is unproven and that Campbell’s view is in fact contrary to what Paul actually says concerning Law and Grace (Watson 2021). Hence, Campbell’s attribution of the affirmation of Natural Theology in Romans 1:18–32 to Paul’s opponent should be rejected; rather, it should be attributed to Paul himself.

Some might argue for a mere “Theology of Nature” (i.e., starting with the doctrines of a particular religion and interprets the natural world from that perspective) by claiming that verses such as “the heavens are telling the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1) is a confession made by God’s people. “Psalm 19, which moves from the all–penetrating heat of the sun to the all–penetrating wisdom of Torah, was written by one who already knew what he wanted to say about Torah and was using the sun as an illustration” (Wright 2019, 219). However, passages like these do not imply that only God’s people recognized that there is a Creator. On the contrary, Romans 1:18–25 implies that those who are not God’s people recognize that as well, for otherwise they would not be “without excuse.”

On the basis of Scriptural passages such as those cited above, traditional Christian theology affirms two types of Divine Revelation: General Revelation refers to God’s revelation of himself through his creation, while Special Revelation refers to God’s revelation of himself in human history. This distinction between General and Special Revelation is implied by Acts 14:17 and Romans

1:20 which (as explained above) indicate that people can know about God based on the natural order which He has created, apart from His historical revelation through the Biblical authors and through Christ.

The earliest known example of the expression “Natural Theology” is found in Panaetius, the founder of Middle Stoicism, who used the term for the philosophical doctrine of God as distinct from the mythical theology of the poets and the political theology of the cults which the states set up and supported (Pannenberg 2004, 76, citing *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, II, 1009). Anaxagoras and Socrates (according to Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.4.2ff) argued from the order of the natural world to the existence of a wise and friendly divine architect who has so admirably arranged all things, while Plato and Aristotle developed a Cosmological Argument for the existence of God (Pannenberg 2004, 78). These arguments were also used by early Christian theologians (see Levering 2016); unlike Wright; they did not evaluate these arguments negatively.

Based on the usage of the term noted above, it can be seen that Natural Theology traditionally refers to what can be known, rationally believed, and/or demonstrated about God by observing and thinking about the natural world, without using the doctrines of a particular religion as premises, such as doctrines concerning the Bible or Jesus. There are two distinct types of Natural Theology: (1) Natural Theology as natural knowledge of God which is immediate and intuitive, and (2) Natural Theology as a matter of logical inference which can be formulated as rational proofs or arguments for the existence and nature of God (Sudduth 2009, 4). This distinction has been affirmed by a number of theologians who distinguished between a naturally implanted knowledge of God (*cognitio dei insita*) and an acquired knowledge of God (*cognitio dei acquisita*) (Sudduth 2009, 50). According to some of its proponents, while *cognitio dei insita* may be mediated by creation in some way, it is not by way of argument or inference from other beliefs or items of knowledge, but it is spontaneously and noninferentially formed in a way analogous to widely held accounts of our sensory perceptual knowledge, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of self-evident truths (Sudduth 2009, 59).

Many theologians throughout history have understood Romans 1:19–20

to affirm the reality of natural knowledge of God, which may be confirmed, clarified, and developed by theistic proofs. Such a justification . . . is, of course, strengthened by passages of Scripture that ostensibly illustrate natural theistic reasoning (for example, Acts 14, 17).<sup>7</sup> (Ibid., 52)

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Pannenberg (2004, 117–118) who claims that ‘there has not been a philosophical Natural Theology from the beginning of creation. But in the history of humanity there has always been in some form an explicit awareness of God which is linked to experience of the works of creation.’

God in his sovereignty can choose to use this human reasoning to produce knowledge of God; “divine sovereignty is compatible with the efficacy of secondary causes” (Ibid., 104–5). The methodology of reasoning inferentially from evidences to the truth of Christian claims is not “alien” to Christian theology, but one which is assumed by various Christian Scriptural passages (e.g. Isa 44:6–8; Luke 7:18–23, see Loke 2019).

General Revelation and Natural Theology (*cognitio dei acquisita*) can go together. On the one hand, God took the initiative to reveal himself by creating the cosmos and creating humans who know God (Rom 1:21) through understanding what has been created (Rom 1:20). On the other hand, Natural Theology (*cognitio dei acquisita*) refers to human discovery and recognition of God’s revelation in nature by inferring from the evidences which God has provided (see the exegesis on Acts 14 above). Thus, the evidences in the natural world can be understood as one of the ways by which God has revealed himself, while the rational arguments of Natural Theology (*cognitio dei acquisita*) which utilizes inferential reasoning from the evidences can be understood as one of the ways by which humans can recognize that God exists.

Now, concerning Wright’s (2019, 3–4, 157) argument that “Natural Theology” should include the Bible and Jesus (see Section 1 above), it should be noted that, while the Bible and Jesus is situated in the natural world, they are not accessible to people from various cultures who have not come into contact with Judeo-Christianity precisely because of its situatedness in history and geography. However, as explained above Natural Theology is supposed to refer to what can be known to all cultures by people who never had the chance to encounter God’s revelation in history but who can know some things about God on the basis of General Revelation, as affirmed by Biblical passages such as Romans 1–2 and Acts 14:14–17. If we incorporate consideration of situated historical events as well as the Bible and Jesus into Natural Theology as Wright suggests, this would obscure the distinction between “Natural Theology” and “Christian theology.”<sup>8</sup> It would confound “what people can know about God by observing and thinking about the natural world without using Biblical doctrines as premises” (Natural Theology; see the exegesis of Acts 14 above) with “the Biblical perspective about the natural world” (Theology of Nature). Now I do agree with Wright that the

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<sup>8</sup> Concerning the distinction between “Natural Theology” and “Christian theology,” while the upshot of my exegesis of Acts 14 and Romans 1 is that Natural Theology is properly part of Christian theology, there is nevertheless a distinction between the “part” (Natural Theology) and the “whole” (Christian theology). To elaborate, (1) Natural Theology is supposed to be based on General Revelation, whereas “Christian theology” is supposed to be based on General Revelation and Special Revelation. (2) Unlike General Revelation, Special Revelation involves situated historical events as well as the Bible and Jesus. (1) and (2) implies there is a distinction between “Natural Theology” and “Christian theology.”

latter can enrich our views concerning the natural world and God.<sup>9</sup> I also agree that understanding history (in particular the Jewish context) is important for understanding Christian theology, and that Jesus should be included in the overall cumulative apologetic case for Christianity. Additionally, I agree with the importance of ‘the church’s mission of bringing healing and justice to the world’ which “is one of the church’s powerful ways of saying that the present creation matters and so it’s worth putting it right” (268). However, when we use the term “Natural Theology” we should try to avoid risking confusion and obscuring the distinct and important purpose that it has, which I shall elaborate below.

### 3. On the Arguments for the Existence of God

Wright (2019, 191) raises the objection that, starting with the natural world (without considering Jesus or the Bible), one would not reason to the God of the New Testament but

to an Epicurean divinity, aloof, detached, uninvolved. You might, as many have, reason your way to the ‘Unmoved Mover’ or the gods of pantheism and panentheism. You might well end up with some kind of Platonic divinity, though the question of whether this being is really ‘God’ or something less personal— ‘the divine’, perhaps— would remain open.

Wright complains that the Cosmological Argument does not show “how, in biblical theology, heaven and earth are designed for one another,” while the Teleological Argument does not recognise “the biblical insight that the ultimate design looks forward to the still- future world” (2019, 252).

In reply, the Cosmological Argument, Teleological Argument etc. are not intended to demonstrate all the attributes of God, nor are they intended to tell us about the relationship between heaven and earth and the future world. Nevertheless, they do seek to demonstrate that a Creator of the universe exists. This would be a highly significant conclusion, for when Christians refer to God they are referring to the Creator of the universe, as various passages in the New Testament (e.g. Rom. 1:20, Acts 14) affirm. This affirmation implies that the Creator of the universe *is* the God of the New Testament.

In particular, the Kalām Cosmological Argument seeks to demonstrate the existence of a First Cause with libertarian freedom (i.e. a Creator) who created the universe and is distinct from the universe (Loke 2017b), and the conclusion

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<sup>9</sup> By saying this, I am not implying that the Biblical perspective should be taken to be “more true” than the truths that are universally accessible. On the contrary, “all truths are God’s truths” and are equally true; this is consistent with affirming that the Biblical perspective can provide clearer truths with more content.



of the Fine Tuning version of the Teleological Argument implies that this Creator is interested in us. The above clarifications address Wright's concern that these arguments reason to Pantheism or an impersonal deity. Affirming that the arguments of Natural Theology establish the conclusion that a Creator God exists does not deny Wright's observation that "the resurrection reaffirms the goodness and God-giveness of the original creation" (199). As explained further in Section 4, the Cosmological Argument, Teleological Argument etc. (if established) would increase the plausibility of the Biblical affirmations concerning the attributes of God (the Creator) who miraculously raised Jesus from the dead, the relationship between heaven and earth and the future world, etc.

Wright (2019, 235) is concerned that sceptics like Dawkins, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche et al might dismiss these arguments as psychological projection: "your 'God' is rather like you, only bigger." However, the projection theory which claims that 'God' originated from human psychology fails to answer where did humans ultimately come from. The Cosmological Argument seeks to demonstrate that an infinite regress of causes is not possible and that only adequate answer is a Divine First Cause (Loke 2017b; 2022b).

Wright objects that

if a 'Natural Theology' is seeking to find the building blocks for a doctrine of God from within the present creation, then . . . it is attempting to leap forwards to the final moment when God will be 'all in all', but without going by the cruciform route the New Testament takes to get there. (258)

The problem with trying to start with this present world and argue up to God is that the present world still reflects, from the Johannine point of view, the fact that it has been taken over by 'the ruler of this world. (264)

Wright is claiming that the cruciform route is a route to the final moment according to the New Testament. However, New Testament passages such as Acts 14:14–17 (see above) show that according to the New Testament neither the final moment nor the cruciform route is necessary for knowing that God exists since Acts 14:14–17 imply that the present world is not dysfunctional to such an extent that humans are unable to know that God exists on the basis of the evidences in nature. In other words, the textual evidence (e.g., Acts 14:14–17) indicates that Wright's objection is based on a misunderstanding of the New Testament. The arguments of Natural Theology are not inconsistent with God making himself more evident in the future (as Wright argues). Neither are they inconsistent with the attempt to meet the needs of the present with answers drawn from God's promises about the future.

#### 4. Concerning “Classical Theism,” the Plausibility of Miracle and the Jesus of the Gospels

Wright (2019, 257–8) raises the concern that the arguments of Natural Theology (e.g., Cosmological, Teleological and Moral) work towards some variant of “classical theism” (51)—which affirms essential divine atemporality, a strong sense of divine immutability and divine impassibility. Wright notes that fitting the Jesus of the Gospels to classical theism is difficult, “especially when we consider the agony in Gethsemane and the ‘cry of dereliction’ from the cross” (Ibid).

The term “classical theism” is understood in different ways in the literature. One might object that Wright’s portrayal of classical theism as some kind of crude Platonism is unfairly dismissive of what classical theism potentially offers. However, this would require a complete and different article. Here, I shall simply argue that, contrary to Wright, the arguments of Natural Theology do not necessarily lead to ‘classical theism’ *as Wright understood it*. The Kalām version of the Cosmological Argument, the Teleological Argument and Moral Argument do not lead to essential divine atemporality, a strong sense of divine immutability and divine impassibility. On the contrary, the Kalām Cosmological Argument concludes that God is timeless without creation and in time with creation: this refutes essential divine atemporality and a strong sense of divine immutability (Loke 2022b, chapter 6). There is no problem fitting the resultant picture with the Jesus of the Gospels, and analytic theologians have proposed various models to show how this can be done (e.g., Loke 2014).

There are a number of leading proponents of the arguments of Natural Theology (e.g. Craig and Moreland) who reject classical theism *as Wright understood it*, but Wright has ignored their arguments. Now, it is true that there are many other Natural Theologians throughout history, such as those of the Thomist tradition, who affirm essential divine atemporality, a strong sense of divine immutability and divine impassibility, i.e., classical theism as Wright understood it. However, they have also offered arguments attempting to show how their commitments are not necessarily incompatible with Christ’s suffering, etc., but Wright does not engage in depth with their writings in his book.

Wright (2019, 257–8) also claims that the standard arguments of Natural Theology lean towards Deism, with its rejection of miracles. He writes “start with the world as a machine, and you will end with God as a celestial Chief Engineer, whose being and operations can be deduced from the way the world currently is” (257). Wright thinks that

The tradition of the modern ‘Natural Theology’ at its best ought then to be seen as a gesture towards a more complicated, and ultimately more interesting and

fruitful, set of questions. By starting with Jesus himself (instead of trying to get straight about 'God' first, and then to force a 'Jesus' - figure into the picture), such questions might answer the longings of the heart as well as the enquiries of the mind, and do so in a way which, transforming heart and mind in the process, retrospectively validated the questions and longings themselves. (2019, 181)

A complete defence of miracles is beyond the scope of the paper, here I shall focus on addressing the objections Wright raises. In particular, I shall show that, contrary to Wright, contemporary versions of the arguments of Natural Theology (if established) do not lead to a Deist God ('Chief Engineer') but rather increase the plausibility of miracles.

To begin, Wright's claim that Jesus himself can answer the longings of the heart as well as the enquiries of the mind fails to take into consideration the fact that a person's understanding of Jesus involves the context of his/her worldview. To an atheist who thinks that the origin of universe is explained naturalistically, Wright's claim that God has acted in Jesus makes no sense. In this context, the Cosmological Argument and/or the Teleological Argument can be helpful for demonstrating that the universe has a Creator, thus opening people's minds to the plausibility of miracles. This is important for many people from (say) mainland China, where naturalistic evolution is strongly emphasized. Hence, chapter 1 of the book *Song of the Wanderer* by Li Cheng, one of the most effective evangelistic books in recent Chinese Church history, starts with "The General Revelation of God: The Orderly Universe." This book has led many unbelievers come to faith and contributed to the growth of the church in China over the years; this observation refutes the common misconception that "arguments for a God's existence are not likely to lead to the God revealed in Jesus Christ" (Moore's 2010, abstract). By referring to what can be known by people from all cultures, the arguments of Natural Theology provide an important point of contact for cross-cultural mission; indeed, they have been used with great success by missionaries (see, for example, Matteo Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*). Now I agree with the objection that the practical effectiveness of the arguments of Natural Theology does not by itself imply their validity. But I am not arguing otherwise in this paragraph; rather, I am merely responding to people (Wright, Moore) who think that the arguments of Natural Theology are not practically effective. The validity of the arguments is defended in the sources cited in the Bibliography (e.g., Craig and Moreland 2009; Loke 2017b; 2022b; Baggett and Walls 2016).

Evans (2010, 8) notes that the main goal of Natural Theology "may be simply to make belief in God a 'live option,' to use William James's term, by removing intellectual barriers to faith. In the contemporary Western intellectual world, a naturalistic world view is often taken for granted." Evans observes that

it is not the purpose of Natural Theology to give us an adequate and complete understanding of God. Rather, Natural Theology is designed to show us the inadequacy of a naturalistic world view, and open us to the possibility of a Special Revelation that will give us the knowledge of God that is needed. (80)

Many contemporary Natural Theologians have proposed a combination of (1) the arguments of Natural Theology (e.g., Cosmological Argument, Teleological Argument, Moral Argument) with (2) the historical argument for the resurrection of Jesus (e.g. Craig and Moreland 2009; Loke 2020). This combination seeks to demonstrate the existence of a personal and moral Creator God who has revealed himself by raising Jesus from the dead, which avoids Deism. The Cosmological and Fine-Tuning Arguments are intended to provide reasons for thinking that there is a God who created the universe with its laws of nature (Loke 2022b; 2017b; Craig and Moreland 2009); a God with such powers would have no difficulty raising the dead. It has also been argued by Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne that there are reasons for thinking that such a God would interfere in history by becoming incarnate. Additionally, Swinburne has argued it is highly improbable that we would find the evidence we do for the life and teaching of Jesus and the evidence from witnesses to his empty tomb and later appearances, if Jesus was not God incarnate and did not die and resurrect to accomplish salvation as he claimed (Swinburne 2003; 2013a; 2013b). These arguments have been neglected by Wright.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have engaged with the scholarly literature on the New Testament (by Campbell, Moo, Keener, Wright et al) and the ancient Mediterranean (e.g. the Wisdom of Solomon and the writings of Panaetius and Xenophon) and shown that, contrary to Wright, passages in the New Testament (Acts 14:14–17 and Romans 1–2) imply that people can start with the natural world apart from Christ and infer that the Creator God exists. I have also engaged with contemporary philosophy of religion literature and shown that, contrary to Wright, some contemporary versions of the arguments of Natural Theology do not entail ‘classical theism’ as Wright understood it. Rather, they can increase the plausibility of miracle and the Jesus of the Gospels, as well as the eschatological perspective which Wright explains so well.<sup>10</sup>

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