

NATURAL THEOLOGY

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Geerhardus Vos

Translated by Albert Gootjes
Introduced by J. V. Fesko



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Natural Theology

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FOREWORD

Geerhardus Vos has long been recognized as a significant figure in American Reformed theology, best known for his various published works on biblical theology. A revival of interest in Vos's thought during the past two decades has brought to light his correspondence, his work on Old Testament eschatology, and most recently his four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*.¹ The volumes of Vos's dogmatics, originally in the form of lectures delivered in Dutch, were transcribed by students, and later made available in mimeographed form, both of a handwritten text and of a typed version. These and other theological texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reside in the Heritage Hall archives at Calvin Seminary and University.

In 2017, James Baird, then engaged in graduate study at the Free University in Amsterdam on Vos's covenantal ethics and anthropology, examined the archival holdings in Heritage Hall and identified the Vos manuscripts on natural theology. He also argued the desirability of a translation of these materials. His examination of the archival materials revealed one fragmentary and two complete manuscript versions of Vos's lectures on natural theology. Given the dates on the two complete texts, these transcripts are either student notes on dictated lectures delivered by someone other than Vos or transcripts of earlier manuscripts of Vos's lectures—all copied after Vos's departure to Princeton Seminary. The archives do not contain any earlier versions of the lectures.

It is worth noting that this pattern of dictating fairly well-formed lectures and of preparing and preserving transcriptions, sometimes as

1. Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. et al., 5 vols. (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham, 2012–2016).

the basis for further publication, whether in mimeographed form or in a printed text, was fairly common in the era. Abraham Kuyper's five-volume dogmatics is itself a *Dictaten*, transcribed and later published.² It was also such a process that led to the final published form of Louis Berkhof's famous *Systematic Theology*.

The present translation of Vos's lectures on natural theology by Albert Gootjes, with introduction by John Fesko, brings to light a significant aspect of Geerhardus Vos's work. Albeit comparatively brief, the lectures evidence Vos's acquaintance with the older Reformed orthodox approaches to natural theology and his extensive knowledge of relevant developments in nineteenth-century thought. Although the dates on the extant manuscripts indicate that they were produced in 1895 and 1898, Vos's original lectures were certainly delivered between 1888 and 1893 when he was professor of theology at the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in all probability contemporaneously with his lectures on dogmatics, which were published in mimeographed form in 1896, after Vos had moved to Princeton and close to the date of the natural theology transcripts. Transcriptions of both sets of Vos's lectures, then, were used after his departure. The difference is that the transcriptions of the dogmatic lectures went through a more extensive process than the lectures on natural theology, culminating in mimeographed publication. The two sets of Vos's lectures—the natural theology and the dogmatics—are also similar in format: both take the form of question and answer, echoing the catechetical mode of the original theological text used in the Theological School, namely, Aegidius Francken's *Kern der Christelijke Leer*.³

Given the similarity of form and inasmuch as Vos's *Reformed Dogmatics* lack a prolegomenon, a case could be made that the lectures on natural theology might have served as an introduction or part of an introduction. They include discussion of religion and of proofs of the

2. Abraham Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek: College-dictaat van een der Studenten*, 5 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1910).

3. Aegidius Francken, *Kern der Christelijke Leer: dat is de waarheden van de Hervormde godsdienst, eenvoudig ter nedergesteld, en met de oefening der ware Godzaligheid aangedrongen* (Dordrecht: J. van Braam, 1713; Groningen: O. L. Schildkamp, 1862).

existence of God, characteristic of the prolegomenal portions of various late orthodox theologies, and they include also a rebuttal of pantheism, an issue that also arises briefly at the beginning of the lectures on dogmatics. Even if this suggestion of a connection between the two sets of lectures does not prove convincing, publication of Vos's lectures on natural theology does fill out the picture of the scope of his dogmatic or doctrinal theology and of his knowledge of nineteenth-century theological and philosophical developments. Hopefully, this publication will serve to stimulate interest in Reformed theological development at the turn of the twentieth century, in much-needed archival work, and potentially in further translation of previously unpublished works by Vos and his contemporaries.

Richard A. Muller
Lowell, Michigan

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The Manuscripts

Vos's lectures on natural theology survive in three sets of student dictation notes, all currently held in Heritage Hall of the Hekman Library at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Two of the three are complete.¹ The first (siglum: DG), written in a fair hand, is signed "13 April 10 PM 95. Grand Rapids Mich. W. de Groot." Willem de Groot (1872–1955) received his diploma from the Theological School in Grand Rapids in 1897 and was awarded a Th.M. from Princeton Seminary in 1918. He served as a home missionary and, while engaged in that work in Chicago from 1918 to 1919, he studied briefly at the University of Chicago. The lecture notes taken down by De Groot are distinguished in that they represent the only copy to include a table of contents and section headings. The colophon to the second copy (siglum: V) reads: "27. Sept. 1898. L. J. Veltkamp. Grand Rapids Mich." Lambertus Veltkamp (1876–1952) received his diploma from the Theological School in 1901 and served as a minister from that year until his retirement in 1942. Like DG, the hand in V is fair. In fact, there is little doubt that V is a neat copy taken from a rough draft. This is suggested not only by the neat hand, but also by the fact that the notebook containing the lectures on natural theology continues immediately with Veltkamp's dictation notes of Vos's lectures on hermeneutics, tidily separated by a blank page bearing the title of this new section.

1. All three manuscripts are found in the "Geerhardus Vos Collection, ID: COLL/319, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 1," in Heritage Hall archive at the Hekman Library, Calvin Seminary and University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

To these two manuscript copies one can add a third, incomplete set of dictation notes (siglum: A). With the text ending abruptly after question 154 (thus omitting the response), A may not be entirely complete, but still preserves roughly two-thirds of the text. Unlike DG and V, A includes no indication of who the student recording the lectures was, nor has it been possible to identify him by his hand, which may be legible but is considerably more difficult to decipher than that of the other two. The lectures on natural theology in A are followed by a single blank leaf, after which we find dictation notes of New Testament exegesis lectures—from the same hand—beginning somewhere in the middle of verse 4 of Ephesians 1 and ending equally abruptly in its discussion of verse 9. After another blank leaf, one finds another three leaves containing four and a half pages of Old Testament exegesis dictation notes on the last two verses of Psalm 2. The unidentified student recorded the lectures beginning on the page facing the inside back cover, such that the notes on Psalm 2 are upside down and backward relative to the lectures on natural theology and on Ephesians 1. Although these notes do take us to the end of Psalm 2, they begin abruptly in verse 11 with “This forms a stark contrast with what...” (*Dit vormt een sterke tegenstelling met wat...*).

These excerpts from lectures on Old and New Testament exegesis seem to indicate that the unidentified student used the notebook in which A is recorded in class. It is therefore possible that A, unlike V (and perhaps DG, given the section headings unique to it²), represents an original rough draft taken down during dictation. Textually, there is greater general agreement between V and A than there is between either one of them and DG. In fact, certain textual variants suggest that there may well be a direct relationship between V and A,³ although greater study is indeed required to verify this initial claim and, if upheld, to

2. That DG is a copy rather than original dictation notes may likewise be suggested by the temporal indicator “10 PM” in the colophon (see above). That is, it may indicate the time when the De Groot finished copying a manuscript made available to him by another student, rather than the time when the professor finished the series of lectures.

3. See, for example, the blank both V and A leave for the “Hibbert Lectures” in Q. 775.b, and the omission by both V and A of the first of two alternatives in regard to Locke in Q. 130.

determine whether V was actually copied from A, whether they rather had a common *Vorlage* (thus meaning that A is not an in-class draft, as suggested above), and so on. Yet the most striking thing about the Vos lectures on natural theology is that the text is actually very stable across DG, V, and A—especially if the extant manuscripts do indeed include both rough draft and neat copy versions, as nineteenth-century students are known to have expanded their rough drafts when they in the evening hours turned them into neat copies for further study.⁴ The close textual correspondence suggests that the extant manuscripts bring us very close to Vos's own words, a circumstance which only increases their value for the study of his thought.

The precise genealogy between the three extant manuscripts deserves more extensive exploration than is possible within the confines of the present translation. Of particular interest are the dates recorded in DG (1895) and V (1898). Does the three-year interval separating the notes indicate that Vos's notes were dictated at the Grand Rapids Theological School even in his absence? Or did theological students copy the notes recorded by fellow students and circulate these manuscripts among themselves? These questions are obviously of value in detailing and evaluating the early reception of Vos's natural theology. In any case, the multiple manuscripts and different dates are indicative of a certain interest in Vos's views at the close of the nineteenth century.

Text and Translation

The first draft of the translation presented here was made on the basis of the transcription of V produced by the Dutch student A. Veuger, as part of a master's level thesis on Vos's contribution to the development of Reformed theology in North America.⁵ This first translation was

4. An example are the lectures that the nineteenth-century Dutch Protestant theologian J. H. Gunning Jr. (1829–1905) gave on Benedictus Spinoza's *Ethics* from 1887 to 1888, of which the editor had both an original rough draft and an expanded neat copy from a single student available to him. See the discussion in Leo Mietus, introduction to *Over Spinoza's Ethica: Collegedictaat opgetekend door Chr. Hunningher: Amsterdam, 1887–1888*, by J. H. Gunning Jr., ed. Leo Mietus (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2015), 9–10.

5. A. Veuger, "Geerhardus Vos en zijn bijdrage aan de gereformeerde theologie in Amerika: Tekst en context van Vos' colleges over natuurlijke theologie" (master's thesis,

then checked against both DG and A (and, in most cases, also against V itself, given the errors detected in the Veuger transcription), with all variants of some significance being recorded. It was this process of text-critical study, of course, which yielded the above conclusion regarding the stability of the text across the three extant manuscripts. Given both this stability and the ready online accessibility of the Veuger transcription, it was not deemed necessary to produce a critical edition of the original Dutch text of the Vos lectures to accompany the present translation. At the same time, the text-critical work that has been done satisfies the demands of due diligence and moreover gives the reader access to all textual issues of import. Above all, it needs to be emphasized that there really is only a single text and that many of the variants concern an error in dictation or copying which most likely would have been caught and corrected in the process of translation and editing anyway.⁶

Below we therefore present the translation of a “best text”—namely, an eclectic text based primarily on V, but with correct or “best” readings supplied from DG and/or A. Footnotes have been inserted wherever textual variants of some significance occurred. Where the variant consists of more than one word, left and right substitution brackets (‘ and ’) mark the extent of the variant, with a footnote following the closing bracket. Variants consisting of only one word are marked only by a footnote. The notes take the following form, as in this example from Q. 75.3.a:

V and A: “morality” (*zedelijkheid*); DG: “rationality” (*redelijkheid*)

The footnotes thus first supply the manuscript evidence for the preferred reading as it has been translated in the main text. Following a semicolon, the notes then supply the inferior or alternate reading (or readings), together with the manuscript evidence for it (or them). Textual variants are presented in both English translation and their original Dutch form, since the latter sometimes helps to shed light on the nature

Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn, 2019), accessed April 20, 2020, <http://theoluniv.ub.rug.nl/241/1/2019%20Veuger%2C%20A.%20MA.pdf>.

6. E.g., the erroneous “finite” (DG) for “infinite” (V and A) in Q. 91, “subjective” (V) for “objective” (DG) in Q. 202.

of the error that occurred. In the example above, for instance, the variant involving the confusion of “morality” and “rationality”—which occurs multiple times—is readily explained by the resemblance between their Dutch counterparts (*zedelijkheid* and *redelijkheid*), especially if one is aware of the similarity between the letters *z* and *r* in late nineteenth-century Dutch handwriting. With very few exceptions, the notes offer no attempt to account for the preferred reading, although cases involving indubitable error are marked as such. The many abbreviations used in the Dutch original have been resolved in the footnotes, except where they form part of the text-critical issue itself or are of significance for interpretation.

Since the underlining in DG, V, and A varies among the manuscripts and is also internally inconsistent, it has not been retained in the translation. For the sake of clarity, the translation has adopted—without notification by way of footnotes—the table of contents and the section headings from DG. As to the numbers for the questions and answers in the course on natural theology, two remarks have to be made. First, for the relative order of the treatment of dualism and polytheism, the translation follows the order in V and A (dualism, QQ. 59–63; polytheism, QQ. 64–68), which has been reversed in DG (polytheism, QQ. 59–63; dualism, QQ. 64–68). This decision was motivated not only by the majority of the manuscript evidence, but also by the fact that the order in V and A follows the order announced in Q. 44 in *all* manuscripts, including DG. Second, in the final third of the manuscript (which is not included in A), the numbering in both DG and V is confused at different places.⁷ Since neither manuscript therefore actually numbers the questions entirely correctly, it was decided to depart from both, and to apply our own, correct numbering in the translation.

7. First, in DG the *numbering* skips from 164 to 166, so that there is no 165 in it; while the *text* in DG and V is thus the same, the *numbering* in DG from 166 to 198 is therefore off by one compared to V. The numbering coincides again from 200, since DG omits what in V is question and answer 199. However, following the number 211, V erroneously presents the text on the *identity* theory (212 in DG), thus omitting the text of the question and answer on the *idealist* theory (211 in DG); this is a classic example of error by homoiocartoon. Starting at 213, text and numbering in DG and V coincide again, right through to the end.

Finally, in terms of style, the present translation retains the somewhat formal character of Vos's lectures, while giving it a modern hue in terms of sentence structure and vocabulary, so as to make it more palatable to a contemporary readership.

INTRODUCTION

J. V. Fesko

Biblical and natural theology may seem like oil and water, Jerusalem and Athens, or in this case, Geerhardus Vos and Thomas Aquinas. What has one to do with the other? Vos and Aquinas might seem like an ill-matched pair, but the two actually do belong together. As much as Vos has a reputation for being the father of contemporary Reformed biblical theology, he spent his earliest academic labors teaching dogmatics at the Theological School, now Calvin Theological Seminary, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. As a part of his teaching load, Vos taught a course in natural theology, whose lectures appear for the first time in English translation in this volume. Setting the context for Vos's lectures, however, first requires establishing the framework for natural theology in the wider Reformed tradition, more specifically in the nineteenth century, and then within Vos's own education. With Vos's lectures properly framed, the stage is set to delve into the lectures themselves to identify their background, methodology, sources, principles, and relationship to his later thought. This introduction concludes with observations regarding Vos's lectures and the prospects of a revival of a Reformed natural theology.

Natural Theology in the Reformed Tradition

When John Calvin (1509–1564) wrote his treatise *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*, he identified three key disputed issues between Rome and the Reformation: the doctrine of justification, worship, and church government.¹ As a *reform* movement, Calvin and other Reformers

1. John Calvin, *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge, in

sought to correct perceived errors, not completely deconstruct and reconstruct theology. In any good history of the Reformation, one must take note of the discontinuities and the continuities between the early modern Protestant churches and their medieval and patristic roots. In this case, one of the continuities lies in the use and promotion of natural theology. Natural revelation is what God reveals through nature, or creation, whereas special revelation is what God reveals through His Word. Natural theology, on the other hand, is the interpretation and systemization of the data of natural revelation. In general, early modern Reformed theologians employed natural theology to varying degrees in their theology, which represents a continuity with the theologians of the patristic era and the Middle Ages.²

Augustine (354–430) is an anchor point for the theology of both the Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. In his famous *City of God* Augustine posited that Platonist philosophers most closely approximated the truth of Christianity, though Plato (ca. 428–348 BC) stood head and shoulders above his disciples.³ In his estimation, the Platonists “have recognized the true God as the author of all things, the source of the light of truth, and the bountiful bestower of all blessedness.”⁴ They discern God’s nature by perceiving the doctrines of God’s immutability and simplicity, and thus conclude that all things must have been made by Him and that He Himself was made by none.⁵ In his mind, Augustine’s observations about the natural theology of the Platonists echo the teaching of Paul in Romans 1:19–20.⁶ But Augustine notes that

Tracts and Letters of John Calvin, ed. Jules Bonnet and Henry Beveridge (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 1:123–236.

2. See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), s.v. *theologia naturalis* (pp. 362–63).

3. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (1950; repr., New York: Modern Library, 1993), 8.1, 4–5. For what follows, also see Alexander W. Hall, “Natural Theology in the Middle Ages,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 57–74.

4. Augustine, *City of God*, 8.5.

5. Augustine, *City of God*, 8.6.

6. Augustine, *City of God*, 8.6. See Marcia Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 142–48.

other pagans, such as the Stoics, promoted the idea of common notions (*ennoiai*), which embraces logic, rational philosophy, and bodily senses, which are, again, things that all testify to the existence of God who has given them to humans.⁷ But as much as Augustine praised pagan philosophers for the accuracy of their natural theology, he was also careful to point out its shortcomings. There is a difference between learning about God through the “elements of the world” rather than “according to God.” Augustine invokes Paul’s warning in Colossians 2:8 not to be deceived by philosophy and vain deceit. The Platonists and Stoics have a natural theology marked by errors.⁸

Nevertheless, Augustine seeks to explain how one like Plato could have perceived God’s nature apart from Scripture. He entertains the possibility that Plato somehow came across the Old Testament, but in the end concludes that the specific source of his natural theology was immaterial given that he draws conclusions from the creation, or what he elsewhere calls the “book of nature.”⁹ Augustine, for example, writes, “Some people read books in order to find God. Yet there is a great book, the very appearance of created things. Look above you; look below you! Note it; read it! God, whom you wish to find, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made.”¹⁰ Augustine promoted the liberal reading of the book of nature by looking for God’s testimony in history, the human body, engineering arts, mathematics, and rhetoric. Christians need not fear the teaching of the philosophers but instead recognize that unbelievers possess the truth, even if unjustly. Christians, he argues, can take the truth that unbelievers have and put it to good use. But in the end, as Christians pursue the truth, they must do so through faith seeking understanding; that is, reason must be subordinated to faith, and faith must submit to the

7. Augustine, *City of God*, 8.7.

8. Augustine, *City of God*, 8.10.

9. Augustine, *City of God*, 8.11.

10. Augustine, *The Essential Augustine*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: New American Library, 1964), 123 (Bourke translates from sermon 126.6 in *Miscellanea Agostiniana*, ed. G. Morin [Rome: Vatican, 1930], 1:355–68); Hall, “Natural Theology in the Middle Ages,” 59.

authority of God's revelation.¹¹ Much of what Augustine opined regarding natural theology continued in medieval theologians to varying degrees.

Anselm of Canterbury (1034–1109) is perhaps one of the best-known advocates of natural theology in the Middle Ages, as he famously continued in the Augustinian mold of *fides quarens intellectum*, or “faith seeking understanding.”¹² Though unlike Augustine's *a posteriori* reading of the creation, Anselm promoted *a priori* arguments in his *Monologion* and *Proslogion*. In the *Monologion* Anselm avoids proofs that rest on Scripture, whereas the *Proslogion* arguably rests upon faith and the authority of Scripture, which reflects its genre as a prayer to God, literally, “words to another.”¹³ Anselm's argument falls within the pale of what constitutes natural theology, but not everyone has been convinced of its persuasiveness, most notably Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).¹⁴ Aquinas had a greater affinity for *a posteriori* arguments and believed that one could rationally demonstrate the existence of God because reason and revelation both proceed from God, and thus a valid argument from reason would never oppose Scripture.¹⁵ Aquinas therefore advanced his five proofs for the existence of God, but these arguments were not a rationalist prolegomenon to his body of doctrine that he unfolds in his *Summa Theologica*.¹⁶ Rather, Aquinas begins his *Summa* on the foundation of Scripture, and his five proofs function as a means

11. Hall, “Natural Theology in the Middle Ages,” 59.

12. Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87.

13. Marilyn McCord Adams, “Praying the *Proslogion*: Anselm's Theological Method,” in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas D. Senor (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 13–39; Gavin R. Ortlund, *Anselm's Pursuit of Joy: A Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2020).

14. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (repr., Allen, Tex.: Christian Classics, 1948), Ia, q. 2, art. 1, ad 2; Hall, “Natural Theology in the Middle Ages,” 61.

15. Hall, “Natural Theology in the Middle Ages,” 64.

16. Contra K. Scott Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2017); cf. Richard A. Muller, “Reading Aquinas from a Reformed Perspective: A Review Essay,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 53, no. 2 (2018): 255–88; Paul Helm, “Thomas Aquinas by K. Scott Oliphint: A Review Article,” *Journal of IRBS Theological Seminary* (2018): 169–93.

of confirming the legitimacy of the claims of Scripture.¹⁷ In other words, the God of the Bible is also the God of creation, the external world to which Scripture points. Some have willfully misunderstood the role of Aquinas's proofs because they have read postmedieval versions of his arguments back into his *Summa*. Or, at best, the proofs only establish a generic theism rather than the existence of the God of the Bible. Critics seldom note, however, that in both his *Summa Theologica* and his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas does not cease his arguments with the proofs but proceeds to unfold the whole body of Christian doctrine that culminates in Christ and eschatology.

After Aquinas natural theology was reshaped in the hands of John Duns Scotus (1265/6–1308) and William of Ockham (ca. 1287–1347). Scotus doubted that one could reliably argue from the creation back to the Creator. Scotus famously opined that we can no more conclude that God is wise from observing wisdom in creatures than we would have reason to believe that God is a stone.¹⁸ Ockham believed that the idea of self-moving souls was a counterexample to the claim that whatever is moved is moved by another agent, thus the argument from motion is not self-evident.¹⁹ The doubts of Scotus and Ockham about the profitability of natural theology were not shared by all, as late medieval theologian Raymond of Sabunde (ca. 1385–1436) reveals in his *Theologia Naturalis, sive Liber creaturarum* (Natural theology, or the book of creatures).²⁰ Sabunde follows the two-books theme of Augustine but expands upon it in his work. He argues that different creatures constitute the letters of the book of creation, which humans can read through their senses. The book of nature is open to all and cannot be destroyed, misinterpreted, or falsified, but the unbaptized are incapable of reading all of the book,

17. Richard A. Muller, "The Dogmatic Function of St. Thomas' 'Proofs': A Protestant Appreciation," *Fides et Historia* 24, no. 2 (1992): 15–29.

18. John Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings: A Selection*, trans. Allan Wolter (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 25; Hall, "Natural Theology in the Middle Ages," 67.

19. Hall, "Natural Theology in the Middle Ages," 67.

20. Raymond of Sabunde, *Theologia Naturalis, sive Liber creaturarum specialiter de homine et de natura eius in quantum homo et de his que sunt ei necessaria ad cognoscendum seipsum et Deum et omne debitum ad quod homo tenetur et obligatum tam Deo quam primo* (n.p.: Martinus Flach, 1496).

and there are certain truths that surpass the powers of reason, thus there is some need of Scripture to overcome these deficiencies.²¹ These broad trends within the patristic era and Middle Ages set the stage for the Reformation appropriation of natural theology.

Despite the claims of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologians and historians, the Reformers did not scuttle natural theology.²² Given the onset of the Renaissance, however, Reformation-era natural theology took on a different form, though maintaining a continuity with the earlier patristic and medieval patterns. Even though modern historians and theologians paint Calvin as one who rejected natural theology, the historical facts paint a different picture. Calvin believed that there were innumerable evidences that manifest the wisdom of God that even the most uneducated and ignorant persons could perceive.²³ But unlike the medieval arguments of Anselm and Aquinas, Calvin's natural theology bore the marks of Renaissance humanism. Calvin neither presents *a priori* arguments such as those that appear in Anselm's *Proslogion*, nor *a posteriori* arguments such as those in Aquinas's *summae*. Instead, he appeals to the arguments of Cicero (106–43 BC) in his *De Naturam Deorum* (On the nature of the gods).²⁴ Cicero's work captures common Stoic conceptions about natural theology that Calvin found agreeable to his own theology. In his work Cicero makes a number of claims about the gods, particularly the idea that they can be known through the

21. Hall, "Natural Theology in the Middle Ages," 68–70.

22. For treatments of the positive use of natural theology by the Reformers, see Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (London: Routledge, 2016); cf. Richard A. Muller, "Was It Really Viral? Natural Theology in the Early Modern Reformed Tradition," in *Crossing Traditions: Essays on the Reformation and Intellectual History in Honour of Irena Backus*, ed. Maria-Cristina Pitassi and Daniela Solfaroli Camillocci (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 507–31 (here 507–9); David VanDrunen, "Presbyterians, Philosophy, Natural Theology, and Apologetics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Presbyterianism*, ed. Gary Scott Smith and P. C. Kemeny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 457–73 (here 458–61).

23. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), I.v.2.

24. Cicero, *De Naturam Deorum*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

creation, an idea that Calvin appropriates in the opening five chapters of his *Institutes* and in his Romans commentary.²⁵

Calvin states that when Paul argues that the gentiles do by nature what the law requires, the Greeks call this *prolepsis*, or “preconception.”²⁶ He also speaks of fallen human beings possessing the seed of religion, a natural disposition to know God, the light of nature, and the readily apparent signs of divinity throughout the creation. Echoing Cicero, Calvin writes, “But, as a heathen tells us, there is no nation so barbarous, no race so brutish as not to be imbued with the conviction that there is a God.”²⁷ Like Cicero, who appeals to the intricacy and marvels of the human body, Calvin claims this, too, is evidence for God’s existence.²⁸ The idea appears in Aristotle (384–322 BC), among others, who called the human body a *microcosmos* that found its analog in the *cosmos*, though Calvin only makes reference to “philosophers.”²⁹ In fact, Calvin does not actually begin to cite Scripture in his opening natural-theological arguments until the fourth chapter, a fact obscured by the McNeill and Battles edition of the *Institutes*, which inserts forty-three Scripture citations that do not appear in Calvin’s opening five chapters.³⁰ Calvin does not begin his formal treatment of Scripture until book 2 of the *Institutes*.³¹

25. Egil Grisliis, “Calvin’s Use of Cicero in the *Institutes* I:1–5—A Case Study in Theological Method,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 62, no. 1 (1971): 5–37; Muller, “Was It Really Viral?,” 511–13.

26. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, vol. 8 of *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, ed. T. F. Torrance and David F. Torrance (1960; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), comm. Rom. 2:14–15 (pp. 96–97).

27. Calvin, *Institutes* (1957), I.iii.1.

28. Calvin, *Institutes* (1957), I.v.2.

29. Calvin, *Institutes* (1957), I.v.3; cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Daniel Graham (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 8.2 (252b); George Perrigo Conger, *Theories of Macrocosms and Microcosms in the History of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1922).

30. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutio Religionis Christianae* (Geneva: Robert Stephanus, 1559); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), Ii–v.

31. Stephen Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 82–83; Muller, “Was It Really Viral?,” 520.

Calvin marshals all of this natural revelation to make the theological point that fallen human beings undoubtedly know of the existence of God. Thus, in concert with the earlier catholic tradition, Calvin maintains that the natural knowledge of God, and what may be discerned from it, are insufficient to give fallen humans a saving knowledge of God.³² But Calvin does admit a natural theology of the regenerate when he states that one can rightly read the creation if one wears the corrective lenses of Scripture.³³ Notably, Calvin does not say that the Scriptures are the eyes but that they come to the aid of eyes weakened by sin.³⁴ In other words, natural theology is valid but only beneficial if used in concert with Scripture.

Calvin stands in the broader catholic tradition and particularly echoes Augustine and Sabunde regarding the idea of God's two books, nature and Scripture. Along with Theodore Beza (1519–1605) and Pierre Viret (1511–1571), Calvin penned the Gallican Confession (1559), which was adopted by the French church. They write in the confession: "God reveals himself to men; firstly, in his works, in their creation, as well as in their preservation and control. Secondly, and more clearly, in his Word, which was in the beginning revealed through oracles, and which was afterward committed to writing in the books which we call the Holy Scriptures" (art. 2).³⁵ Guido de Bres (1522–1567) built upon the Gallican Confession with his own Belgic Confession (1563) but makes explicit what lies implicit in the Gallican concerning the book of nature:

We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: God's

32. Calvin, *Institutes* (1957), I.v.14.

33. Calvin, *Institutes* (1957), I.vi.1.

34. Abraham Kuyper, "The Natural Knowledge of God," trans. Harry Van Dyke, *Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 73–112 (here 84).

35. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from confessional documents come from Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, 3 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict humans and to leave them without excuse. Second, God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God's glory and for our salvation. (Belgic Confession, art. 2)

This confessional codification demonstrates that Reformation era Reformed theologians shared a broad continuity on natural theology with earlier patristic and medieval theologians. Contrary to the claims of a number of modern theologians, Calvin does not depart from medieval or Renaissance epistemology (Frame), reject categories like natural law (Lang), deny that fallen humans can have true knowledge derived from the creation (Barth), make a complete break with scholastic theology and its conceptions of natural theology and ethics (Van Til), or begin with God's self-disclosure in Scripture (Dooyeweerd).³⁶ This is not to say, however, that Calvin and other Reformed theologians repristinated medieval arguments but that there is a continuity between them. Calvin and the Reformers do not, for example, talk about *theologia naturalis* (natural theology), but rather the knowledge of God available in creation. But there is also no outright rejection of natural theology despite many modern claims to the contrary.³⁷

The use and explicit promotion of natural theology began in the period of early orthodoxy. One of the earliest examples comes from the work of Franciscus Junius (1545–1602) and his *Treatise on True*

36. John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2015), 174; August Lang, "Reformation and Natural Law," in *Calvin and the Reformation*, trans. J. Gresham Machen (New York: Revell, 1927), 56–98 (here 69, 72); Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising Nature and Grace by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply No! by Dr. Karl Barth* (repr., Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 94n88, 100–105, 107; Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966), 210; Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 93–94; Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Grand Rapids: Paideia, 2012), 116; Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, vol. 1, *The Greek Prelude*, ed. D. F. M. Strauss, trans. Ray Togtman, in *The Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd*, series A, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Paideia, 2012), 15.

37. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:271; Muller, "Was It Really Viral?" 516–17, 525–28.

Theology.³⁸ In this work on theological prolegomena, Junius discusses the relationship between natural (revealed) theology and supernatural (also revealed) theology. The latter rests on the basis of the former. That is, according to Junius, nature and grace are the two forms for the communication of revealed theology.³⁹ Other early orthodox theologians contributed to the developing discussion of natural theology. One such theologian, Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1638), wrote his *Theologia Naturalis* in the context of developing a philosophical curriculum for Reformed academies and universities that included the study of metaphysics and natural theology.⁴⁰ The works of Junius and Alsted represent an expansion of the theology of the Reformation; the Reformers were largely interested in expounding supernatural theology in their works of catechetical, scholastic, or positive theology.⁴¹ This does not mean, as some claim, that the Reformed theologians were tempted to make friends with the line of Cain and thus corrupt the biblical theology of the Reformation, which supposedly was free from all nonbiblical influences.⁴² Rather,

38. Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology: With the Life of Franciscus Junius*, trans. David C. Noe (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014); Junius, *De theologia vera* (Leiden: Ex Officina Plantiniana, 1594).

39. Willem van Asselt, introduction to *A Treatise on True Theology*, by Franciscus Junius, xl; also Van Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ecyptal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64, no. 2 (2002): 319–35 (here 333). Nathan Shannon erroneously claims that Junius writes only of a postfall “hamartic natural theology,” which is not true theology. See Nathan D. Shannon, “Junius and Van Til on Natural Knowledge of God,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 82, no. 2 (2020): 279–300. The essay is an effort to enhance “the historical credentials” of Cornelius Van Til. But such claims fail to factor the structure of Junius’s argument, namely, that revealed theology consists in two forms, natural and supernatural, both true; the former grounded on natural capacities of human beings, the latter on grace, a point that Van Asselt notes but Shannon misses. Contra Shannon, Junius does not argue that there is “no activity of the natural man which may properly be called ‘theology’” (Shannon, “Junius and Van Til,” 279). I am grateful to Richard Muller for pointing out this issue.

40. Johann Heinrich Alsted, *Theologica Naturalis* (Prostějov: Antonius Hummius, 1615).

41. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:272.

42. Contra Cornelius Van Til, *Herman Dooyeweerd and Reformed Apologetics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1972), 3:17.

this was an organic development as the needs of academic instruction grew with the creation of Reformed educational institutions.

In this context, theologians like Alsted argued that natural theology could have both a preparatory and apologetic function; it could lead to the higher truths of revealed theology or could be the basis for debate with nonbelievers.⁴³ But like the Reformers before him, Alsted rested his understanding of natural theology upon Scripture; in the preface of his work he cites Psalm 19:2–3; Romans 1:19–20; and Acts 14:17.⁴⁴ And in concert with the earlier tradition, he appeals to reason, experience, and the book of nature (*liber natura*). Reason is the internal *principium* that all human beings possess and is also called the light of nature (*lumen naturae*) or the light of reason (*lumen rationis*). Universal experience is the external *principium* which all human beings experience outside of themselves. And the book of nature is the world, which testifies to divine things, though Scripture is necessary for a right reading of this book.⁴⁵ But Scripture is a mixed *principium*, that is, Scripture testifies to things that are also in nature.⁴⁶ Alsted believed that the purpose of natural theology is twofold: (1) to render human beings inexcusable and (2) to prepare them for the school of grace. Once again, he rested these ideas on Scripture, namely, Romans 1:19–20.⁴⁷ Like Calvin before him, and in concert with the early church, Alsted appeals to Augustine, Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662), and Cicero. Echoing Aquinas, Alsted maintains that nature and grace are not in conflict.⁴⁸ Alsted employs these principles to develop proofs for the existence of God, to understand God's essential attributes, and to establish God as creator and governor of the world, as well as to discuss angels and spiritual entities, humans as a microcosm, and physical being in its different properties. This does not mean supernatural theology lies on a foundation of natural theology.

43. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:273.

44. Alsted, *Theologia Naturalis*, preface, 3; also Muller, "Was It Really Viral?," 521–25.

45. Alsted, *Theologia Naturalis*, 2, 5.

46. Alsted, *Theologia Naturalis*, 7.

47. Alsted, *Theologia Naturalis*, 3.

48. Alsted, *Theologia Naturalis*, 4.

Rather, his work was ultimately designed to refute atheists, Epicureans, and sophists in his own day, as the subtitle to his work indicates.⁴⁹

The same trends continue in the period of high orthodoxy in the theology of the Westminster Confession (1647). The Westminster Confession begins with its chapter on Scripture, but the opening line of the confession gives a tip of the hat to natural theology: “Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable...” (1.1).⁵⁰ This statement echoes themes that appear in Calvin about the function of natural revelation. But the confession also spells out other positive functions for natural theology, such as ordering circumstances of worship (1.6), a means by which unbelievers might morally frame their lives (10.4), and an ethical guardrail for the exercise of Christian liberty (20.4), as well as a means by which all people know that God exists, has lordship over all, is good, does good unto all, “and is to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served” (21.1).⁵¹

Some, such as Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), argue that the confession presents a “distinctive doctrine of natural revelation.” Van Til believes that the distinctive character of the confession’s natural theology emerges clearly from “how intimately it is interwoven with the Confession’s doctrine of Scripture.”⁵² “God’s revelation in nature,” writes Van Til, “together with God’s revelation in Scripture, form God’s one grand scheme of covenant revelation of himself to man.”⁵³ Van Til’s description of the confession is accurate in and of itself, but his characterization of it

49. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:303.

50. *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines Now by Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster* (London: Company of Stationers, 1647).

51. See J. V. Fesko and Guy M. Richard, “Natural Theology and the Westminster Confession of Faith,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 250th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan (Fearn, U.K.: Mentor, 2009), 3:223–66; Wallace W. Marshall, *Puritanism and Natural Theology* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2016); VanDrunen, “Presbyterians, Philosophy, Natural Theology,” 461–62.

52. Cornelius Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2002), 263–301 (here 263–64).

53. Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 264.

as unique is inaccurate. The confession falls within the general patterns of patristic, medieval, and Reformation expressions, that is, in terms of God's two books, nature and Scripture. Aquinas, for example, in his commentary on Romans 1:19–20, writes, "God manifests something to man in two ways: first, by endowing him with an inner light through which he knows: *send out your light and your truth* (Ps. 43:3); second, by proposing external signs of his wisdom, namely, sensible creatures: *he poured her out, namely, wisdom, over all his works* (Sir. 1:9). Thus God manifested it to them either from within by endowing them with a light or from without by presenting visible creatures, in which, as in a book, the knowledge of God may be read."⁵⁴ Similar observations appear in the Westminster Assembly's comments on Romans 1:19–20 in their *Annotations*, a commentary on the whole Bible.⁵⁵ From the vantage point of Paul's letter to Rome, Aquinas spies out the creation and reads it in concert with Scripture, as does the confession. This does not mean there are no differences between them. For example, Aquinas cites Sirach, an apocryphal book, which the confession rejects. But the overall patterns of argumentation in the confession and Aquinas are parallel.

Francis Turretin (1623–1687) continues in this same path when he affirms a place for the instrumental use of philosophy in theology. Like Aquinas before him, he believes that "grace does not destroy nature, but makes it perfect. Nor does the supernatural revelation abrogate the natural, but makes it sure."⁵⁶ In Turretin's construction, natural and supernatural revelation work in concert, thus philosophy, what can be known by the light of nature, can "serve as a means of convincing the Gentiles and preparing them for the Christian faith." Turretin explicitly and approvingly cites Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215), for the idea that philosophy "prepares the way for the most royal doctrine."

54. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, trans. F.R. Larcher, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, Wyo.: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), comm. Rom. 1:16–20, §116 (pp. 40–41).

55. *Annotations Upon All the Books of the Old and New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: Evan Tyler, 1657), comm. Rom. 1:19–20.

56. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992–1997), 1.13.3.

In Turretin's judgment, Clement follows the apostle Paul's example in Acts 14 and 17. In addition to Turretin's characterization of philosophy as a preparation for the gospel, he echoes the two-books theme when he says that things known through nature function as a "twofold revelation." Beyond this, philosophy (or the light of nature) serves as a rational instrument of clarification both to distinguish between right and wrong and to prepare the mind for the engagement with higher sciences. Like Augustine and Calvin, Turretin argues that the light of nature includes common notions, the knowledge of right and wrong written on the conscience, as Paul attests in Romans 2:14–15.⁵⁷ In another quotation from Clement, Turretin warns, "Let philosophy submit to theology, as Hagar to Sarah, and suffer itself to be admonished and corrected; but if it will not be obedient, cast out the handmaid."⁵⁸ These same patterns and arguments appear in a number of other high orthodox Reformed theologians, but this all changed with the more rationalist theologies of late orthodoxy.⁵⁹

Some late orthodox theologians became intertwined with Cartesianism, and others, such as Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671–1737), the son of Francis Turretin, gave greater emphasis to the role and power of reason in theology. Jean-Alphonse continues the two-books theme common to Reformed theology, but unlike his father who gave a limited role to the light of nature, he expands the scope and powers of reason. Jean-Alphonse writes, "For natural religion is the foundation of revealed, which cannot be known and explained but by principles drawn from it—On the other hand natural Theology is republished, perfected and illustrated, by revealed."⁶⁰ Other Reformed theologians, such as Johann Friedrich Stapfer (1708–1775), argue that revealed theology assumes but cannot prove the existence of God, whereas natural theology with

57. Turretin, *Institutes*, 11.1.12–17.

58. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.13.4–5.

59. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:305.

60. Jean-Alphonse Turretin, *Dissertations on Natural Theology* (Belfast: James Magee, 1777), 1; cf. Martin I. Klauber, *Between Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 1996), 62–103.