

Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022). 672 pp. RRP: \$52.80 Hardcover.

I met Chris Watkin in an integrative scholars' network in Australia, and it is a great pleasure to review his new book *Biblical Critical Theory*.

The work comes at the task of thinking Christianly in a thoroughly and uniquely biblical way. Chris seeks to bring biblical notions in contact with contemporary thinkers who are largely, but not exclusively, of the continental European philosophy tradition - hence "critical theory" in the title. What makes the book unique is that he not only brings biblical concepts in touch with our contemporaries, but he does so in such a way that his work inherits certain aspects of the bible itself.

One might mention its length (it is 600 pages which is on the way to my NIV's 2000 pages) but more importantly a central idea of his is that the multiplicity of genres and languages in the bible is a testimony to the multi-perspective nature of wisdom. Thus, one of his key concerns is whether biblical or secular beliefs are 'wiser' in the sense of the number of perspectives they can embrace.

This is nicely outlined in chapter 14 ("wisdom literature") which I personally found to be as good an introduction to the book as the introduction itself. To quote him at his most eloquent:

The important point to be made here is that the poetry, stories, and apocalyptic images in the Bible are not mere husks from which the real kernel of abstract propositions is to threshed free. Plain descriptive prose is not the secret truth of all other biblical genres. (p.329)

In keeping with the benefits of multi-perspective wisdom, he claims that full-orbed biblical truth often stands above the secular simplifications. Christians are richer, both in their thinking and in their politics, to "cut across," these secular dichotomies. In other words, the untidiness of the bible is a strength in keeping with reality itself and allows Christians to embrace more valid perspectives simultaneously than our contemporaries. The book presents a template for what he calls a *meta-hodos* (a path "above") secular "flat" alternatives to reality, or, more colloquially, he offers "diagonalizations" which cuts across them.

As an example of diagonalization, consider the nature of lived experience. Is it the case that we "do well by doing good" as the book of Proverbs might suggest, or that "life is meaningless" as the book Ecclesiastes might suggest? Chris suggests that the book of Job "diagonalizes" the two: "So yes, Job does play the whole Proverbs-Ecclesiastes keyboard in such a way that neither melody drowns out or completely dominate the other." (p.324)

The other way the book is deeply biblical is that he respects the role of narrative by laying out the book in an order that corresponds with the scriptural storyline. The advantage of this, as

anyone who attends a church with policy of preaching through all the scriptures would recognize, is that the book is not focused on any particular Christian hobbyhorse, but that biblical themes get biblical weight.

In particular, he eschews censorship. He accepts traditional notions of judgment and sin, and claims in Chapter 4 that their proclamation is a uniquely Christian contribution to public discourse. He notes, I think correctly, that universal sin is grounds for human equality (alongside creation and redemption).

He also devotes a number of chapters to the eschaton. A fruitful example of his diagonalization in this regard is his rejection of either Radicalism (only the ultimate matters) or Compromise (the ultimate should be shunned for this-worldly “penultimate”). Instead, he argues forcefully that “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” shows us a better way (p.501).

I found Chris’s book brought me joy in a way that academic writing rarely does. There are two reasons for this. First, I long for more teaching on Creation and the Eschaton, but in such a way that does not jettison the importance of sin and the salvation narrative. This book perfectly meets this need. Second, I believe that revelation is most useful when it says things that make us uncomfortable. To be sure, we have to do the exegetical work to make sure that our lack of comfort is not because we are holding onto bad interpretations, but if that is not so:

...when Christians encounter something in the Bible that we do not agree with or that makes us uncomfortable, it is a case for rejoicing. If the Bible did systematically reflect our own late modern Western sensibilities and values back to us—as some today are determined that it should – then so much the worse for all other cultures past, present and future, for if we make the Bible friendly to one culture, we place a heavy burden on the back of those from other cultures who seek to draw near to the God of whom it speaks. (p.582)

As a piece of integrative scholarship—discovering what relationship there might be between biblical ideas and secular ones—time will tell how well it finds approval among scholars by meeting three key challenges. One is to see the instances when the same word is used differently across different areas. A related challenge is to perceive if different strands of thought from different disciplines are referring to essentially the same idea. On page 148, for example, Chris discusses the notion of “gaze” as used by Sartre and how it relates to the existential crisis of Adam and Eve during and after the Fall. Finally, there is the challenge of dealing with the ideas of others on their own terms so that your description of their position is one they would recognize and be prepared to affirm. From what I have read of continental philosophers (mostly Nietzsche and Sartre), Chris’s descriptions seemed fair, but the judgement of other reviewers awaits.

No book can do everything, and the multiplicity and degree of specialization of contemporary disciplines makes the task of this book far more difficult than the task Augustine faced when he penned the *City of God*, a work which Chris self-consciously emulates. Many disciplines are left out of this book, but that is perhaps to be expected from the “Critical Theory” moniker.

This book would be a great resource for any graduate student in philosophy, theology or critical theory. It is sufficiently accessible that a Christian who is not a student would also be able to get a lot out of it. It would be a valuable apologetic tool for someone interested in the Critical Theory tradition.

It may be usefully compared with three somewhat similar works. Compared with John Stott’s *Issues Facing Christians Today* it lays out the biblical material in a narrative way whereas Stott lays it out thematically and then classifies it by contemporary issues. Compared with Carl Trueman’s *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, it is more of an ‘ahistorical’ critique (in the sense that the content of secular ideas and not their source is in view) whereas that book is more of an intellectual history. Compared with Tim Keller’s *The Reason for God* this book starts with biblical ideas and responds to other ideas in the light of these, whereas Keller’s book starts with seeker “defeaters.”

There are some movies that I enjoy seeing once, but I would not come back a second time. Books can be like that too, but I would definitely want to read *Biblical Critical Theory* again, and discuss it with others. I predict it will be a Christian classic.

Gordon Menzies

University of Technology, Sydney NSW, Australia