

## A BOOK REPORT

“BIBLICAL CRITICAL THEORY/HOW THE BIBLE’S UNFOLDING STORY MAKES SENSE OF MODERN LIFE AND CULTURE”

February 17, 2024

**TITLE OF BOOK:** “BIBLICAL CRITICAL THEORY/How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture”

**AUTHOR:** Christopher Watkin, PhD, University of Cambridge, and Associate Professor in French Studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, who is a scholar of substantial reputation in the area of modern and contemporary European thought, atheism, and the relationship between the Bible and philosophy. He has published extensively.

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### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Wow! This is a hugely important, perhaps paradigm shifting book. I don’t think that it is an overstatement to say that this book establishes a new paradigm for Christian thought as Christians and Christian congregations seek to understand, critique and hopefully deal with the huge number of complex issues which affect our societies of today. The Author does not propose to offer cookie cutter solutions to modern issues, but he does offer a methodology for the thought processes which Christians can use in trying to apply God’s Wisdom, as provided through Scripture and its unfolding story, in seeking to understand and apply the unique strategies provided by the Bible to our many, highly complex issues.

This book has certainly had a huge impact on me, your Reviewer. Candidly, its impacts on me are so large and numerous as to make it virtually impossible to enumerate those impacts. It is a large book, of over 600 pages, and I found that it has to be read in short to medium sections and slices, while leaving time to meditate on just what the Author is saying and concluding. I don’t own this book, as it was provided to me to read and review. However, if I can afford it, I am going to buy it and put it in my personal library so that I can have it for periodic review and consultation. In fact, I am very likely to read it and re-read it, yearly, maybe even as a part of daily devotions. It is worth that much respect. If any book has shifted a paradigm for me, it is this book. It has certainly changed the thought processes which I might hopefully use in trying to apply Biblical wisdom to my efforts to understand and critique the issues which are confronted by our modern cultures. I am not going to find solutions to those issues in this book, but I am going to find a Biblical based methodology for thought to those issues.

Additionally, if you, the Reader, are interested in Biblical hermeneutics, then you must have this book. It takes each of the major parts of the Biblical Story, from the Trinity, to Creation, to the Creation of Humankind, to the Fall and the introduction of Sin into Society, all the way through to Revelation, and it sheds unbelievably interpretive lights on each of these parts of the Biblical Story. Then, through an unbelievable use of countless literary sources, Biblical and extra Biblical, Theological and Philosophical, the Author demonstrates how each of these parts of the Biblical Story has impacted human history and is impacting current day societies and cultures. I reluctantly admit that I have extensively engaged in a study of Biblical hermeneutics, and that I co-teach a class on that subject matter, but I am personally blown away by the huge new insights into that field which this book has provided for me. As one example of this Book’s personal impact, I cite its Chapters 21 through 28 which deal with the book of Revelation and

Biblical Eschatology. I have taught about Revelation, and have always wondered whether I am doing so on a terribly superficial level. I now know that such has been the case. I cannot wait to again teach Revelation, and to make use of the tremendous insights about Revelation and Biblical Eschatology which are provided by this Book. If you, the Reader, have an interest in hermeneutics, then this book is a “must have”.

If you, the Reader, have interests in seeking to find and learn ways in which the unfolding Biblical Story, and each of its various included stories and parts can help you and help others who are brought to you by God for assistance in understanding how the Bible and the Biblical story can help you and them to better understand, and as Christians relate to and hopefully help the current day cultures (and there are many such cultures) then you must have and must study this book. In that respect, let me ask a Question: Do you know what “Critical Theory is and how it has been used and is currently being used in efforts to critique and impact culture and society?”. Well, I have had a very superficial understanding of “Critical Theory”, including so called “Critical Race Theory”, and have never found a suitable definition for Critical Theory or Critical Race Theory. My limited understanding has been that so-called “Critical Theory’s theory was originated centuries ago by some German Philosopher living I think, in Frankfurt, and that this theory, as initially espoused by him, was one to be used in critically viewing and understanding, and then possibly reforming the cultures in which various individuals live. My further, hugely limited understanding of Critical Theory is that it has been joined with the philosophical theories of individuals such as Jean-Jaques Rousseau, Kant, Hobbes, Marx, Lenin and others (unfortunately including the originators of so called “National Socialism”), in order to spawn some of the world’s most revolutionary and often vicious “isms” (for want of a better word), Socialism, Communism, National Socialism and others, and, perhaps, modern day “critical” movements such as feminism, and Critical Race Theory. In each of these uses or mis-uses of Critical Theory, the advocates of same have sought to use a perhaps legitimate critique of their current day culture, noting its problems, in order cause one group or groups of people to be pitted against another or other groups of people, such as, in the case of Communism, which sought/seek to pit the poor and downtrodden and weak of society against the wealthy and ruling class. Critical Theory, as used or misused in these respects has always used a concept of “victimization” , or “oppressor and oppressed” in order to cause the perceived victims or oppressed to rise up, sometimes violently, against their oppressors. One might even find that so-called “Liberation Theology”, which uses many Biblical terms, is a form of “Critical Theory”. In many of these cases of the uses of Critical Theory one perceived tyranny has simply been replaced by another tyranny. One, perceived to be (and in many cases, actually) tyrannical ruling class has simply been replaced by another tyrannical ruling class, with those originally on the bottom now lording over those originally on top, and, in fact, actually lording over everyone with terrible results. Now, taking into account my limited understanding (perhaps all wrong) of Critical Theory, and considering that I approached by my reading of this book with that understanding, what did I find with respect to the Author’s “Biblical Critical Theory”? I did not understand how the Bible and its revelation of God’s Wisdom for living a flourishing life and for how we are to relate to Him and each other could possibly be used in connection with “Critical Theory”. Well, I was wrong, deeply wrong. Our Author shows by use of a huge knowledge of numerous sources how each part and component of the unfolding Biblical Story can be used by modern day Christians to not just critically review their current day cultures but also to, hopefully, help bring peace and *Shalom* (at least to the extent it can be achieved in a severely fallen world prior to God’s final action) to that culture. The Author then, in his concluding Chapters, integrates the conclusions reached in each of the preceding Chapters which relates to each of the Biblical components into an over-arching methodology for what can truly be called a “Biblical Critical Theory”, or a theory for a Biblically based critique of modern day cultures, and for, hopefully, bringing about some *Shalom* to such cultures without the misused (by some) Critical Theory demands to achieve cultural or societal change by pitting people against people, or by violent revolution.

Well, these are just my impressions, but let me leave with an overriding final impression. This huge book is extremely, and I mean extremely well written. In order to arrive at his conclusions, the Author brings to bear his unbelievably comprehensive knowledge of the Bible and of Biblically based literature (ancient and current and in between) and of philosophical literature (ancient, current and in between, religious and non-religious) in order to describe the evolution of the thought processes and philosophies of each of the Christian, non-Christian, secular, religious and non-religious thinkers, philosophers, theologians and leaders whose thoughts and theories have impacted human cultures over the centuries, and to thereby demonstrate “how we have gotten to where we are, and how we are who we are” in what he refers to as the “late modernity age”, and to use the unfolding Biblical story and what it teaches in order to critique our cultures and to hopefully bring about some reasonable changes (*shalom*) in same. He doesn't give you cook book, step by step descriptions of what might be done, but he at least gives you a Godly based, Scripturally based methodology for trying to figure out what might be done. The Author does not purport to give us instructions as to what our culture should be, or about how to achieve specific changes in same. Rather, he provides for what I would characterize as a “paradigmatic shift” in the thought processes of individual Christians and the Church, which should enable Christians and the Church to approach some of the most troubling and controversial issues that confront modern day cultures using a Biblically based Critical Thinking process. He wants us to get out of our narrow, culturally dictated thought processes and approach problematic personal and societal issues in the manner which the unfolding story of the Bible teaches us to do.

This is a WONDERFUL BOOK. I cannot recommend it strongly enough. Every pastor, church leader and theologian, academic or lay person, should read and study this book, and, hopefully, include it in his or her library for constant future consultation. To you who are pastors, I would opine that you can fill a boat load of sermons with the insights the Author provides us in this book.

### **WHAT IS THE AUTHOR DOING WITH WHAT HE AUTHOR IS SAYING**

It is not possible to summarize, with any degree of justification for the Author's writings, the contents of this book. I am not going to even attempt to do so. If I was into plagiarism, I would simply set forth here one or more of the wonderful endorsements of this book which are provided by some of the prominent theologians and church leaders at the very beginning of the book, or I would try to paraphrase Tim Keller's FOREWARD which leads this book. I am not in to using either of such approaches, as I feel that you, the Reader, are entitled to read my personal thoughts about this book's contents.

I might be over stating my case or the Author's intentions (but I don't think so) when I state that, in my view, the Author is seeking to achieve a paradigmatic shift in the thought processes of today's Christians and the Church (writ large) as we/they seek to understand and appropriately critique, from a Biblical point of view, our current day cultures and the huge, problematic and sometimes highly controversial issues which such cultures are facing and, perhaps, to seek to achieve positive changes in those cultures and positive resolutions of such issues in a non-violent, and, to the extent practicable, a non-disruptive manner, which recognizes the good and not so good features of the culture, and hopefully brings about reasonably attainable *shalom* in the culture. I can state, with complete confidence, that the Author has certainly opened my eyes to a new way of thinking about the issues our American cultures (and there are many) are facing, including those of a social justice, environmental, governmental policy and political nature. I think that this book will also open your (the Reader's ) eyes in the same respects.

I am going to jump around, all over this book, in order to outline my personal “take-aways” (a phrase which one of my mentors is fond of using) from this book and in order to hopefully state, in some reasonable fashion, what I find that the Author is doing with what he is saying in this book. Such “take-aways” are as follows:

- 1) **So What?:** In his Introduction, the Author states the reasons why he wrote this book. My take-away from that Introduction is that the Author wants to answer the “So What Does This All Mean, or Why Does This Help Me?” Question about the Biblical Story. It is great to read the Bible and meditate about its contents, and to seek to understand it, but how will these efforts assist me or my church or group in wrestling with the issues which bombard us daily? How does the Bible help us/we in looking at our modern day, late modernism culture and in trying to understand it and, hopefully, in living in it as Christians and in, perhaps, seeking to achieve positive changes in it?
- 2) **Abandon Umbilical Thinking:** The Author defines a term which he uses, that term being “**Umbilical Thinking**” using the filtered nourishment which passes from the mother to the unborn child through the Umbilical Cord as a metaphor for the manner in which we receive our daily information and then filter it through our habit acquired biases and prejudices, many of which have been conferred upon us, or brought to bear within us (generally without our even recognizing that this is happening) by the marketplace, marketplace advertisements, our government, governmental sources of information, our “politics and political biases and ideologies”, our parents, family and friends and social groups. We like to think “I am free and I will make up my own mind”, but, really, in most cases, that is not the case. We become programmed to think in the ways we think. We acquire our ideologies, and are programmed by those ideologies to think that those of a different persuasion are not just wrong or in error but are downright stupid, if not in fact dangerous. In my terminology, not the Author’s, we become “close minded” without even knowing that we are becoming such, and, in many cases, the market philosophy of our culture (If we live in our Western, so called “free” culture) or the ideologies of our governmental structure (if we live in a non-western culture, such as, for example, China or Russia) cause us to become so “close-minded”.
- 3) **What is Culture?:** I, like you the Reader, have been exposed to a number of explanations of the term “Culture” which have been provided by a number of experts. The Author defines “Culture” in a somewhat different fashion. He opines that a “culture” is made up of the “Figures” which impact those within it. “Figures” are made up, at least in part, of: 1) The languages, ideas and stories which are indigenous to our society; 2) The manner in which we divide and pattern time and space within our society, including the differentiation between private and public “space”; 3) The manner in which we view “Reality”, meaning is there nothing, or is there something beyond and outside of the material world which we inhabit; 4) Our Behaviors, including those which are “permissible” and those which are “not permissible”; 5) Our Relationships with and among family, friends, institutions (e.g. governmental institutions, our churches, our guilds, unions, non-profits, etc.), and our “Relationships to and with Authority”; and 6) The Objects and Artifacts which surround us, which are receptacles for or are modifiers or mediators of our “meanings”, and which impact the rhythms of our lives, and oftentimes operate in a dialectical relationship with our lives (e.g. our flags and symbols and anthems, our smartphones, our vehicles, our houses, the power grid, and the “things” we are led to believe that we must have. Our “Culture” is defined, at least in substantial part, by the impacts of these “Figures”. So, if we want to impact a culture, or engage that culture, we want to impact one or more of these Figures.

- 4) **Biblical Figures/the Figures of a Biblically Driven Culture:** The Bible has significant patterns and rhythms which repeat throughout its pages, including, as examples:
- a. **Language, Ideas and Stories:** the Biblical concept of Covenant, or repeated narratives embodying the “first shall be last motif”.
  - b. **Time:** The rhythm of God’s promises and the fulfillment of such promises.
  - c. **Space:** the Biblical idea that God is the ruler over all space, not like the realms of the “localized gods” of the ancient world.
  - d. **Structure of Reality:** The Biblical distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom/Kingdoms of this world.
  - e. **Behavior:** The first Christians meeting together on the Lord’s day to sing, worship, break bread, pray and hear teaching.
  - f. **Relationships:** the unity of all believers in Christ, and God as the lawgiver and purveyor of all Truth, and of wisdom.
  - g. **Objects:** the location and architecture of the tabernacle, or available modes of transportation for Paul’s missionary journeys.

It is these Figures which the Author “... proposes to bring into conversation with some of the major figures of late modern culture and society”.

- 5) **Super Abundance:** An over-riding theme and “Figure of the Biblical story is one of God’s “Super Abundance”, as contrasted with the themes or concepts of many of the “Philosophies or Ideologies” of many of the “Systems of this World”. God has, through His super abundant love, mercy, provision, grace, creation and justice made abundant provisions for His creatures. This super abundance of God’s economy, if you will, can be contrasted with the concepts of “scarcity”, and competition for resources and things (including power, wealth, etc.) among individuals and groups and nations who are caused to battle (in one way or another) among each other for these perceived scarce resources and things and sometimes for life itself.
- 6) **Diagonalization:** So how does our Author propose that we should use God’s Wisdom as provided by the individual parts of the Bible, and by the entirety of the unfolding of the entire Biblical Story in order for Christians to look at, see, critique and possibly improve the cultures in which they find themselves. He proposes that we use a methodology which he refers to as “**Diagonalization**” in which the God’s wisdom, as provided to us through Scripture, is used to, for want of better terms, mediate or triangulate, or in the Author’s words, **Diagonalize** between the competing goals or concepts or ideals of the modern-day ideologies which impact our current day cultures. In critiquing each of the current day ideologies or systems which are used by or which have impacted cultures, over time, and which impact our current day, late modernism cultures, our Author uses a large number of simple, easy to understand and highly informative diagrams. These diagrams generally consist of two squares, one on the right and one on the left, with a diagonal running between the two squares, starting at the lower right-hand corner of the left-hand square and ending at the upper left-hand corner of the right-hand square. Inside the left hand square, the author sets for the basic goals, ideals or concepts or perceived problems of one of two competing ideologies or systems used in the world, and in the right-hand square the Author sets for the competing goals, ideals or concepts or perceived problems of the other of the two competing ideologies or systems. The diagonal contains God’s Wisdom, as revealed by Scripture, with the diagonal reconciling or mediating between, or triangulating between the two competing theologies or systems, each of which generally has its good points and its not so good points (meaning that, in most cases neither ideology is all good or all bad). THE READER CAN GAIN A GEAT UNDERSTANDING OF THIS BOOK AND OF THE AUTHOR’S BASIC DIAGONALIZATION SYSTEM BY GOING TO AN

“INDEX”, ENTITLED “FIGURES”, WHICH APPEARS NEAR THE BEGINNING OF THE BOOK, AND THEN LOOKING AT SOME OF THE DIAGONALIZATION DIAGRAMS, IN THE BOOK, WHICH ARE INDEXED IN THIS “FIGURES” INDEX. For example, the dichotomies between two current competing ideologies or political views, Conservatism and Progressivism (which we sometimes refer to as “Liberalism”) are diagramed (in their respective left and right boxes, and **Diagonalized** with the wisdom of Scripture, by way of the Diagram which is indexed in the “Figures” index and which appears at page 555 of the book.

- 7) **Competing Systems or Ideologies:** While our “**Umbilical**” ways of thinking about cultural or societal issues (which such Umbilical ways of thinking are likely not recognized by us, and have really been, in some respects, thrust upon us or inculcated within us, again, largely without our even knowing that such is the case) make us loathe to concede (even with small concessions) that there is substantial merit in the views as to such issues of an ideology which conflicts with our ideology (e.g., if you are a “conservative, then your views are at least seen by you to hugely conflict with the views of a “progressive” or “liberal” on issues such as poverty, crime, etc.). There is oftentimes some substantial merit in the views of those of the competing ideology, but to see that merit we have to listen to the views of those of a competing ideology and seek to understand why those views are held. At least, in many cases, those of each ideology are in agreement that there is an “issue or problem”, and the competition is over the perceived methods to be used to try to solve or deal with the issue or problem. For example, those of each ideology might well recognize that poverty is a problem, but they differ on the methods to be used to solve that problem. So, resorting to the Bible, how should Christians or the Church writ large, or individual congregations try to reconcile or triangulate between competing ideological views in order to approach a problem or issue in a Godly manner? The Author proposes that those of each ideology must at least listen to and understand the views of those of the competing ideology (thereby attacking Umbilical Thinking) and then seek to Diagonalize (resorting to the lessons of Scripture), using God’s Wisdom, between the competing views. Hopefully, using this methodology of Diagonalization, some reasonable solution to the agreed upon issue or problem can be arrived at in a generally non-disruptive manner.
- 8) **Approaching Various Parts of the Biblical Story:** Hopefully with the basic concepts which are, quite generally outlined above, the Author approaches each of the basic parts and components (and individual stories and genres) of the Bible, and: 1) engages in a truly eye opening, extremely illuminating hermeneutical exercise as to each such part or component (and this, alone, by itself, makes this book hugely worthwhile); 2) demonstrates the impacts and some applications of each such part or component; and 3) in most cases uses the lessons of each part or component of Scripture to DIAGONALIZE between competing philosophical or ideological views which have been used or are currently being used to approach the human issues or problems which can be dealt with by such lessons of Scripture. The Author thereby takes the Reader through each part, component, book and genre of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and through the entire unfolding of the Biblical Story in order to provide to Christians, the Church and individual congregations, a methodology for the use of the Bible to critique the culture or society in which each individual Christian or congregation resides, and, hopefully, Biblically Diagonalize between the competing ideologies or systems of that culture or society in order to confront its issues.
- 9) **Overly Simplistic:** This outline of the Book’s contents is greatly over simplified and, as the Author might say, is very “reductionist”. I admit that such is the case. I cannot begin to do justice to the Author’s use of his unbelievable knowledge of a huge number of literary sources in subject matters of theology, philosophy (including secular and religious philosophy), history

and other subjects to demonstrate the various philosophies, ideologies, political and market systems which have evolved, over centuries, within this world and its various nations and cultures. For example, if you want to try to understand the evolution of “secularism” and the “secular” or “naturalist” view of this world, or to understand “modernism”, “late modernism” and how it evolved and how we have gotten to where we are, you will not find a better source for providing such an understanding than this book. If you then want to try to reconcile the views of those epistemological systems with those of God, as revealed by Scripture, then this book is your source for such an exercise.

- 10) **An Eye Opening New Way of Thinking:** What this book has done for me, and what I think it will do for you, is to: 1) Change or expand my/your hermeneutical conclusions about significant parts of Scripture; 2) Change or expand my/your views about the various manners in which the lessons of various parts of Scripture and the overall, unfolding Story of Scripture can be applied to many of life’s current day complex issues, and 3) Change my/ your views of, and methods of thinking about many of the difficult issues which are confronted by our cultures, societies and governments. I have found that this book is truly a paradigm shattering book.
- 11) **Of Particular Interest to Me:** Of particular interest to me are: 1) The Author’s description of the trail through the writings and conclusions of the many prominent philosophers (including Plato, Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, Rosseau) which have led to the evolution in thought that has resulted in what the Author refers to as “late modernity”; and 2) The Author’s descriptions of the manner in which our persons, personalities, self-views and in fact who we view ourselves as being have been impacted by the market, material, and consumer paradigm, which causes us to define ourselves as much as by what things we have and what assets we have more than we are so defined by our understanding of who we are in Christ, and 3) The Author’s extended dive into the book of Revelation, and what it really means, and what it means to the ways in which we should view today’s world and cultures.

In summary, this is a huge, wonderful, extremely well written and highly impactful book.

### HOW TO READ THIS BOOK?

The Answer to the Question of “how should I read this book?” is dependent upon why you want to read it. What causes you to approach this book? What do you hope to get out of it, or what use do you intend to make of it? If you simply want to have this book in your library to use as a reference book, then you can learn its contents and be aware of the potential future uses of its contents by: 1) Fully reading the Introduction, and 2) Familiarizing yourself with the opening Table of Contents, titled “Contents”, and 3) Particularly be aware of the separate table of contents titled “Figures” and then briefly review some of the DIAGONALIZATION diagrams listed in that “Figures” table, and 4) Read the ending Conclusion at the end of the book and the Conclusions which appear at the ends of most of the Book’s Chapters.

If, as opposed to simply placing this book in your library as a source for future reference, you want to understand what the Author is trying to bring about then, unfortunately, you have to read (and likely re-read) it, in its entirety. This reading effort is not going to be one which is quickly or easily undertaken. This is a huge book of over 600 pages. Absorbing and gaining some understanding of each of its Chapters will require that you read that Chapter, and then stop and think about it, and, perhaps, go back and re-

read that Chapter. I found that I needed to take a number of “rest and thinking” sessions as I read this book. It is very well written, and is a source of infinite information which is useful for many areas of Biblical study, particularly, in my case, Hermeneutics. So, if you want to get the most out of this book, then slowly and meditatively read it, and stop and rest from time to time, and once you have completed the book, keep it in your library and make frequent future uses of it as you approach various parts of your Biblical studies, particularly if you are (as I am) interested in Biblical Hermeneutics.

#### **IS THIS BOOK USEFUL FOR TEI OR ECLI?**

Absolutely! Absolutely! It should be retained in TEI’s library. It should be recommended for students who are interested in the fields of Biblical hermeneutics and/or application, or even Christian Ethics. While it is not a “basic or beginning” text in hermeneutics, the Author’s hermeneutical reflections as to each of the Bible’s main parts of sections or books are of huge use if one is teaching Biblical hermeneutics. The Author’s reflections on the book of Revelation are pure gold, in and of themselves. Frankly, I cannot wait to again teach “Hermeneutics”. When I do, I am going to draw on this book in many respects.

Thank You

Dan Simon