

Book Review

Christopher Watkin.

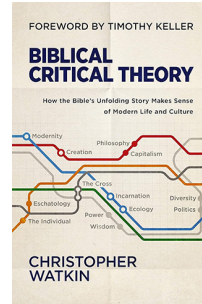
Biblical Critical Theory:

*How the Bible's Unfolding Storyline Makes Sense
of Modern Life and Culture*

Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2002. hc, xxiii+648.

\$26.29, £25.00. ISBN 978-0-310-12872-4.

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Watkin's *Biblical Critical Theory (BCT)* is one of the latest substantial additions to the already sizeable body of literature examining the relationship between Bible and culture from an evangelical perspective. However, describing *BCT* in this way obscures what Watkin accomplishes in this book. *BCT* is not simply another book out of the evangelical camp tackling one of several hot-button issues of the day or simply another theoretical examination of models of Christian cultural engagement. Watkin's goal is more ambitious. As Watkin explains in his introduction, "At our own moment in history it is not enough for Christians to explain the Bible to our culture. We must explain our culture through the Bible..." (p. 31). This is what Watkin sets out to do in *BCT*.

BCT, therefore, intentionally stands in the tradition of Augustine's *The City of God* in which the Roman world (and, indeed, all of history) is not simply critiqued but viewed and evaluated through a Biblical lens. *BCT* is roughly structured around the grand narrative of the Biblical storyline. Over the course of 28 chapters, Watkin addresses as broad subject categories: Creation, the Fall, Israel, the Incarnation, Redemption, and Eschatology. Within each of these subject categories, Watkin interacts with an impressive array of subtopics covering a vast conceptual terrain including

philosophy, sociology, ecology, entertainment, politics—even Brexit. Watkin demonstrates how each subtopic can be viewed as a dichotomy which in many cases can be presented as either/or propositions. For each dichotomy Watkin demonstrates how the scriptural perspective does not simply pick a side but instead presents a vision that subverts the very categories upon which such dualities are constructed. In this way the Biblical perspective *diagonalizes* as it cuts across both options. Diagonalization is not merely a *via media* or compromise but "most often a radical intervention, subverting accepted commonplaces and challenging us to reconsider our assumptions, leaving the initial dichotomized options appearing distinctly bland and unappealing by comparison" (p. 19). In this way the Bible transcends artificial dualities and out-narrates all opposing narratives. Some of these dualities are well known: sovereignty and responsibility, the already and not yet, transcendence and immanence, while the paths of other dualities are less well-worn.

For example, concerning the environment Watkin argues that our relationship to the environment as humans can be viewed as a dichotomy between exploitation and veneration. This is to say, either the environment is worshipped ("Sacred Groves") or it is exploited ("Trees as facts"). Instead, argues Watkin, the Biblical perspective of the environment is neither of the two. Rather, the biblical perspective is one of care or stewardship: "Christians do not

believe in ‘mother nature,’ but we do rejoice that we have a ‘sister nature,’ and we seek to protect and care for nature like we would a sibling, a fellow part of God’s creation” (p. 105). Thus, the biblical world-view cuts across both poles and forges an alternative view. Or take another example. Watkin points out how Proverbs and Ecclesiastes represent two ways of viewing the world. Proverbs depicts a view of life that emphasises life’s predictability within a cause-and-effect framework; the understanding that certain behaviour elicits certain results. Ecclesiastes on the other hand, depicts a view of life in which unpredictability, chaos and anarchy are daily realities. How are these two views to be reconciled? Watkin suggests that the book of Job provides the answer as it diagonalizes and cuts across both views. “Job”, claims Watkin “[plays] the whole Proverbs-Ecclesiastes keyboard in such a way that neither melody drowns out or completely dominates the other” (p. 324). Thus, the worldviews expressed in either of the two books of wisdom literature are reductionistic when viewed in isolation, but when they are woven together as it is in Job and the rest of scripture it provides a “rich, complex, and existentially authentic view of the world” (p. 324).

BCT’s primary contribution is its articulation of a unified and full-orbed view of Biblical truth as the lens through which all of reality can be viewed and evaluated. In an academic milieu, where specialization and compartmentalization are the order of the day, Watkin’s treatment of Biblical truth as a coherent whole which addresses all aspects of life is refreshing and indeed, I would argue, sorely needed. It serves as a reminder that answers to some of life’s most pressing and complex questions are indeed addressed in scripture even if those answers are not always to be found at the surface level of the

text but rather embedded in the larger narrative. Secondly, *BCT* serves as a useful entrée for further study of Biblical engagement with a diversity of academic disciplines, schools-of-thought and “isms”. On this score *BCT* is a veritable feast. The reader will find no shortage of sources to explore and additional tributaries of enquiry down which to meander. For this reason, *BCT* is best enjoyed with a notepad in hand. The sheer number of works with which Watkin interacts is staggering but one never gets the impression that references are being used gratuitously or simply to impress. While one could wish for greater engagement with each topic, the sheer scope of Watkin’s project precludes this. The interactions are, therefore, necessarily brief but still informative and nuanced. Watkin acknowledges that his contribution is not the final word on any of the topics with which he engages but views it instead as a stimulus to further study and a call for further contributions. I hope *BCT* finds a wide reading and that many will heed his call.