Latimer Trust
Monthly Reading List – December 2022

This is a summary of recent books read by Martin Davie, compiling his evaluations and the commendations of others.

In this edition:

Author	**Title**	**Martin's opinion**
Christiana Hale	*Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C.S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*	*Deeper Heaven* is a very helpful introduction both to Lewis' science-fiction trilogy and to his writing more generally. It highlights the importance of an often-neglected part of Lewis' work.
R B Jamieson and Tyler Wittman	*Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis*	The principles and rules for the interpretation of Scripture which this book contains are correct and important and they are all well explained and applied. Christians who possess a reasonable grasp of the contents of the Bible and of Christian theology, and who want to learn to read the Bible better, will find this book extremely helpful.
Glen Scrivener	*The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality*	This is concise, accessible, based on good scholarship and convincingly argued and it provides important challenges for the target audiences. If the decline of Christianity in Britain is to be halted and reversed, then what is required is vigorous and confident evangelism and Scrivener's book provides an excellent resource for this.
Michael Ward	*After Humanity: A Guide to C.S. Lewis's The Abolition of Man*	Lewis' argument against moral subjectivism remains as important today as when it was first written, and Ward has done a great service by providing a comprehensive and reliable introduction to what Lewis said and the reasons why he said it. Everyone should read *The Abolition of Man* and everyone should read Ward's work as an invaluable tool to help them properly understand it and to see why it is so important.
Christopher Watkin	*Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*	This is a long and complex work that looks in detail at how biblical teaching, and the Christian tradition stemming from it, relate to contemporary thought and contemporary society. However, those who are up to the intellectual challenge of engaging with this book, and have the stamina to do so, will find themselves richly rewarded.

Christiana Hale, *Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C.S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*, Roman Roads Press, ISBN 978-1-94448-256-5, £19.62 (Hardback, e and audio editions also available).

Overview:

Christiana Hale teaches Latin and English at a Christian school in the United States and is also the author of a number of works of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. Her new non-fiction book is an introduction to the three books *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength* which concern the adventures of Dr Elwin Ransom, and which together make up C S Lewis' science fiction trilogy.

As Hale notes:

> The trilogy itself lies somewhat hidden among Lewis's greater-known works, and many readers who love Lewis are yet unaware the trilogy exists, like a treasure mine buried in a familiar backyard. And those who have read the trilogy tend to number it among the unapproachables – just some of those books that are simply too strange and fantastical and, well, *weird* to really like.

According to Hale, the reason why people struggle with the trilogy is that they fail to appreciate that it is grounded in Lewis' lifelong love for medieval literature and for the worldview reflected in this literature. In her words:

> … unless we understand his love for the medieval world and his self-proclaimed efforts to reawaken respect and admiration for the Medieval Model of the cosmos in the modern mind, we will misinterpret or even neglect many of Lewis's writings as strange and unintelligible. No work of Lewis's suffers more from this than his Ransom trilogy. Where many readers stumble through the trilogy in a fog of disconnected themes and seemingly meaningless characters, there is, in fact, a deep underlying unity in the trilogy - one that can be fully understood only through the lens of medieval thought and literature.

In Hale's view we need 'to read and study the Ransom Trilogy because it gives us a deeper understanding of the world we live in – the world God created', and the purpose of her book is consequently to help people engage with the trilogy by providing a 'readers' guide' that explains the trilogy's nature and purpose in the context of Lewis' Christian faith and his love for medieval literature and the medieval view of the cosmos.

The book consists of an introduction, three main parts which introduce each of the three books in the trilogy in turn, and a conclusion.

The introduction explains the nature of the medieval cosmos and the way in which the planets were understood as each having their own personality and influence on human affairs, and also looks at how the medieval view of the personality and influence of the planets is reflected in the particular 'atmosphere' or flavour of each book in the trilogy.

The three main parts provide a summary of the plot of each book and then look at a variety of topics necessary to understand that book better. For example, in Part I Hale explains why a central theme of *Out of the Silent Planet* is the way in which Ransom changes his view of the universe from thinking of 'space' as 'a black, cold vacuity' to seeing it instead as 'the heavens,' the 'womb of worlds, whose blazing and innumerable offspring looked down nightly upon the world with so many eyes.'

The reason that this is a central theme is because the point of the trilogy is 'to encourage this sort of imaginative conversion in his readers, to reawaken a medieval imagination as we view our entire cosmos and the heavens in particular.' This does not mean that we need to accept medieval science:

> Lewis isn't arguing that we reject everything we have learned about what space is actually like. Rather, he wants us to recover the image of the cosmos as living, breathing, Word-spoken. In our reduction of the cosmos to the material, we no longer experience wonder, or, praise, or the bottom heavy security of those who look up into a vast well of starlight. And it is this sense that he seeks to awaken.

The conclusion consists of two chapters. The first explains how the story told by Lewis in his trilogy and the central role of Ransom within it, as a bridge between earth and the heavens, point us to the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation. In the trilogy, writes Hale:

> Deep Heaven stoops, desiring to look into the mysterious doings of earth and mankind because *Christ* descended to earth. In taking on man's flesh and nature, He bound them to Himself and they have died and risen to the heavenly places in Him. Ransom is a bridge, but he is a bridge modelled after an even greater Bridge that not only unites Heaven and Earth but unites His people to Himself and His father through the Spirit.

The second explains that the reason that Lewis employs the Medieval Model of the cosmos although it is 'factually speaking, false' is because 'A tale does not have to be factually true in order to communicate deep truths.' For Lewis, argues Hale, the tale told by the Middle Ages about the cosmos acts as a more effective pointer to the real truth about the universe given to us in the Bible than the purely materialist account often given by modern science. To quote Hales:

> We like to see ourselves as 'enlightened,' and we use the term *medieval* to indicate backwards, old- fashioned, unenlightened, or dark. But in this study guide we have looked back into the 'dark ages' and found something surprising. Rather than gloom and midnight darkness, we have stumbled into a grand hall blazing with light and life and dance – a world of golden edges and scarlet banners, a world full to the brim with music and living creatures, a world where monks and scribes cannot write anything down without decorating their margins with birds and beasts and flowers and swirls of gold. There is no space uninhabited, no spot where there is not some creature that has been made to sing the praises of its Creator.
>
> This picture of the cosmos is much closer to the one presented in the Bible. We have grown accustomed to letting science, a science influenced by materialist reductionism and evolution, teach us about the world. How does the Bible speak of the heavens? Of angels and archangels and seraphim? Of principalities and powers? Of dragons and unicorns and Leviathan and armies of flame? It can't all be metaphorical.

Martin's opinion:

Deeper Heaven is a very helpful introduction both to Lewis' science-fiction trilogy and to his writing more generally. It highlights the importance of an often-neglected part of Lewis' work. It enables the reader to understand how what can be baffling in the trilogy actually makes perfect sense when viewed in relation to the medieval view of the cosmos. It points us to the truth that Lewis' studies of medieval literature, his works of Christian apologetics, and his novels, all fit together as part of grand overarching project to challenge the modern materialistic view of the universe in favour of the supernatural view of the universe taught in the Bible and re-echoed by the writers of the Middle Ages. It shows how Lewis consistently seeks to re-enchant the world so that when we look into the night sky we no longer see just empty space, but instead see the heavens and hear them declare the glory of God. Highly recommended.

Commendations:

John Ehrett has written:

> For those readers longing to go 'further up and further in,' Christiana Hale's new book *Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C.S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* sets out to demystify Lewis's epic, offering up a wide-ranging exploration of the trilogy's complex inner workings.

R B Jamieson and Tyler Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis*, Baker Academic, ISBN 978-1-54096-467-0, £20.99 (hardback and e editions also available).

Overview:

Biblical Reasoning is a new book that has been co-authored by two American Baptist scholars, R. B. Jamieson, who is an associate pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, and Tyler R. Wittman, who is assistant professor of theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

As they explain in their introduction, the goal of their book:

> …. is to assemble a toolkit for biblical reasoning. The toolkit's goal is to enable better exegesis. The goal of that exegesis is, ultimately, to see God.
>
> Hence, by 'better exegesis' we mean exegesis that is not only more adequate to the text itself but also, especially, more adequate to the ultimate reality to which the text bears witness and more adequate to the text's ultimate goal. That reality is the triune God and that goal is the sight of God's face that will eternally satisfy our souls.

As they further explain, they take the idea of 'biblical reasoning' from the work of the Anglican evangelical theologian John Webster. They note that:

> According to Webster, biblical reasoning is 'the redeemed intellect's reflective apprehension of God's gospel address through the embassy of Scripture, enabled and corrected by God's presence, and having fellowship with him as its end.' Webster distinguishes within biblical reasoning two overlapping, mutually informing modes of reasoning: exegetical and dogmatic. Exegetical reasoning is the act of 'following the words of the text.' This act is theologically and epistemologically primary. To run in the wake of the apostles and prophets is every theologian's chief obligation and should be their chief delight. Dogmatic reasoning 'produces a conceptual representation of what reason has learned from its exegetical following of the scriptural text. In dogmatics, the 'matter' of prophetic and apostolic speech is set out in a different idiom, anatomized.' Exegetical reasoning attends to the order and flow of the text, following its twists and turns; dogmatic reasoning attends to the theological claims of the text, looking along and with the text to discern the ultimate reality to which it bears witness. Neither is complete without the other; both move from and toward one another in a continual, mutually informative exchange. Dogmatic reasoning enables readers of Scripture to locate major concerns of the text quickly and easily, to perceive Scripture 'in its full scope as an unfolding of the one divine economy,' to see Scripture's unity and interrelations, and to discern its proportions. With this sense of scope and proportion that dogmatic reasoning provides, exegetical reasoning is better equipped to discover the fullness present in discrete prophetic and apostolic discourses. Embracing both intellectual activities in an organic process, 'biblical reasoning' keeps them from neglecting each other.

The toolkit for biblical reasoning which Jamieson and Wittman provide in their book consists of:

> …. a set of theological principles and their corresponding exegetical rules. Each principle is a doctrinal commitment, a constituent element of the catholic Christian faith. Each rule turns an aspect of that principle into an exegetical guideline and guardrail, "operationalizing" a theological principle for exegetical purposes. If the principles articulate the grammar of Scripture, then the rules merely show us how to read Scripture with the grain of its own grammar. Our articulation and development of these principles is deliberately spare. We aim to offer not exhaustive doctrinal discussion of these core Christian teachings but only their exegetical on-ramps.

The principles and rules contained in the book 'cluster primarily around two mutually illuminating foci: the Trinity and the person of Christ.' The reason for this, the authors say, is twofold.

The first reason:

…. is material. The identity of the God who speaks in his Word and saves us by sending his Son and Spirit is at the heart of God's gospel address. To penetrate more deeply into the gospel is to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of the Trinity and the Son's incarnation, and vice versa.

The second reason is that:

….this is where the divorce between biblical studies and theology has been felt most painfully. Creedal Christian teaching about the person of Christ and the Trinity enjoys broad ecumenical consensus. These central doctrines define and distinguish the Christian faith. Yet these are among the doctrines treated with most scepticism by the contemporary biblical studies guild. The breach between theology and exegesis that we aim to help repair is widest here.

The book consists of nine main chapters which Jamieson and Whitman summarise as follows:

After theologically describing the teleology of Scripture's readers and the shape of God's teaching activity in the first two chapters, in chapter 3 we consider the ontology and function of Scripture within that activity. There we will explain in more detail what biblical reasoning looks like in practice. In chapter 4 we articulate a principle and a rule that mark God's qualitative difference from all things as their creator and that remind us to read Scripture's depictions of God in a manner befitting the canon's witness to his holy, infinite, transcendent existence. After thus considering God with regard to his singular essence, our remaining principles and rules consider God with regard to the distinction of persons in the Trinity. In this respect, our order of expounding these rules follows the order of the two Testaments. Chapters 5 and 6 will develop Trinitarian rules for exegesis, chapters 7 and 8 Christological ones, and then chapter 9 considers the Son and the Spirit from the standpoint of their relations to the other divine persons.

In these nine chapters Jamieson and Whitman list seven theological principles and ten exegetical rules that follow from them.

For example, Principle 4 states:

God who is the creator of all things *ex nihilo*, is holy, infinite, and unchangeable. Since God is qualitatively distinct from all things, he therefore differs from creatures differently than creatures differ from each other.

Rule 3, 'God fittingness,' that follows from this principle then holds that:

Biblical discourse about God should be understood in a way appropriate to its object, so read Scripture's depiction of God in a manner that fits the canonical portrait of God's holy name and his creation of all things out of nothing.

In each chapter the principles and rules are explained in detail with reference to numerous biblical texts and with the help of citations from numerous Christian writers from the Patristic period to the present day.

Chapter 10, 'Putting the rule kit to work,' employs the ten rules developed in the previous nine chapters by looking at John 5:17–30 and 'seeing what each rule contributes to reading the passage.'

Finally, in their conclusion the authors return to where they began in their introduction by explaining that:

Though it has taken twists and turns through waters of different turbulence and depth, the argument of this book is simple: Beholding Christ by faith requires that we hear and obey Christ's teaching. In order to understand Christ's teaching, we must reason both exegetically and dogmatically. And we pursue this project of biblical reasoning in service to biblical living, in the confident hope that one day faith will give way to sight …

To behold the glory of the crucified Christ is to know now by faith what we will one day see in truth, with unveiled face: the glory that embraces us, purifies us, and raises us further up and further in to the radiant beauty of God. This is the end of Christian exegesis because it is the end for the Christian life.

Martin's opinion:

Biblical Reasoning is not a book that should be read by people who are just beginning to read the Bible. They will quickly get overwhelmed by the detail and complexity of the material and by the sheer number of biblical texts and quotations from Christian writers that the authors cites and explore. However, those Christians who do possess a reasonable grasp of the contents of the Bible and of Christian theology, and who want to learn to read the Bible better, will find this book extremely helpful.

Jamieson and Whitman are right to insist that the growth of mature Christian disciples requires the application of both dogmatic and exegetical reasoning and in their book they help their readers to see what this double requirement means in terms of exegetical practice. The principles and rules for the interpretation of Scripture which their book contains are correct and important and they are all well explained and applied. This is a book which all serious students of Scripture should have on their shelves so that they can learn to read Scripture in a way that does justice to its chief subject matter, the being and activity of the Triune God and the God-man Jesus Christ, and to its chief aim of helping people to live in increasing obedience to Christ in this world so that they may behold God's unveiled glory in the world to come.

Commendations:

Fred Sanders comments:

> In content, this book is a profound study of the triune God and the incarnate Son. But in form and method, it's a master class in how to read the Bible directly and accurately, aided by classic, doctrinal wisdom. Introducing readers to clear rules and proven tools, Jamieson and Wittman put theology where it belongs: in service of knowing God through his Word. Biblical Reasoning is a triumph, a gift given to equip the saints for the work of interpretation.

Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality*, The Good Book Company, ISBN £9.99 (978-1-78498-749-7 (e and audio editions also available).

Overview:

Glen Scrivener is an Anglican clergyman who is an author, speaker and filmmaker and the director of the evangelistic charity Speak Life.

He begins his new book *The Air We Breathe* by declaring that:

> Goldfish don't see water. Goldfish see what's in the water, they see what's refracted through the water, but I assume (yes, assume—I haven't done the proper investigations) that goldfish don't see the water itself. And yet there it is. It's their environment. Universal but invisible. It shapes everything they do and everything they see. But they don't see it.
>
> Here's the contention of this book: if you're a Westerner—whether you've stepped foot inside a church or not, whether you've clapped eyes on a Bible or not, whether you consider yourself an atheist, pagan or Jedi Knight—you are a goldfish, and Christianity is the water in which you swim.

As Scrivener goes on to explain, the point of this analogy (and of the analogy of someone noticing their breathing which follows it) is to highlight to his readers

> …. your dependence on the environment around you and your place within the world of ideas. Here's a chance to slow down and pay attention to the profoundly Christian atmosphere you inhabit.
>
> 'Christian?' you say. 'I'm not sure my world is particularly Christian.' This book is, in large part, about making that case. You can be the judge of how successful it is, but here's my contention: we depend on values and goals— and ways of thinking about values and goals—that have been deeply and distinctively shaped by the Jesus revolution (otherwise known as 'Christianity'). These values are now so all-pervasive that we consider them to be universal, obvious and natural: the air we breathe.

In chapter 1 of his book Scrivener explains how the message about the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, seemed the height of foolishness in the first century, but how the Paul and the other early Christians:

> Persisted with their foolish preaching, and, remarkably, they gained a hearing. Over time their belief that Christ crucified was also 'the power of God' began to look less and less ridiculous because a power seemed to be at work. A movement was beginning. First minds changed, then lives, then communities, then cultures, then everything. Eventually this foolish message became the most influential in human history.

As a result of its influence, argues Scrivener, seven values have become central to Western thought. These values are:

> Equality: We believe in the equal moral status of every member of the human family, no matter their rank, race, religion, gender or sexuality.
>
> Compassion: We believe a society should be judged by the way it treats its weakest members.
>
> Consent: We believe that the powerful have no right to force themselves on others.
>
> Enlightenment: We believe in education for all and its power to transform a society.
>
> Science: We believe in science: its ability to help us understand the world and improve our lives.
>
> Freedom: We believe that persons are not property and that each of us should be in control of our own lives.
>
> Progress: We believe in moral improvement over time and that we should continue to reform society of its former evils.

In chapters 2–8 of his book Scrivener shows how each of these seven values has its roots in the Christian faith and only truly makes sense in that context.

For example, in chapter 2 he notes how:

> …. The God story and the equality story stand or fall together. If we feel that life is sacred, that every human possesses an inviolable dignity and equality, and that no one deserves to be trampled down simply because they are smaller or weaker or poorer, then we are standing on particularly biblical foundations. There is a thread running from Genesis through the New Testament to our 21st century humanist convictions. In the coming chapters we will trace out the developments in more detail, but for now it's enough to know that the thread is strong. It needs to be - the modern world hangs by it.

For a second example, in chapter 4 he recalls the question asked by Rachael Denhollander at the sentencing of the serial sexual predator Larry Nassar, 'How much is a little girl worth?' and comments that her words force us:

> … to consider the standards by which we judge abuse. For abuse to be abuse we have to believe certain things: that bodies should be treated as temples; that sex is sacred; that children are valuable; and that the powerful should not exploit the weak but serve them. These values constitute the straight line against which we judge Nassar's actions as crooked. But such values are by no means universal. They are not the way that the animal kingdom operates, and they are not the presumptions of other human societies. They are Christian beliefs. Larry Nassar is not excused of his evils by claiming some kind of Christianity; he is accused by it. It is, very particularly, the goodness of Jesus that defines the evil of his abuse.

For a third example, in chapter 8 he observes how the belief that the 'arc of history' is progressing towards a desirable goal is now taken for granted in Western society, but also observes that this belief has its foundations in the proclamation of the Old Testament prophets concerning the coming of the Messiah and that there is a huge difficulty 'for all believers in progress who are not believers in the God of justice and mercy.' The reason for this difficulty is because:

> Whether left wing or right wing, whether communist or fascist, if we are only working on the horizontal plane, then belief in progress can become a licence to make history in whatever way we choose. Without a polestar above us, we can take matters into our own hands, forging our own path and calling it 'historical inevitability.' This is one of many reasons why the century of progress was followed by an unparalleled century of violence.

Finally, in chapters 9 and 10 Scrivener looks at why the decline of Christian faith in Western society has led to misery rather than happiness and why the way forward for our society lies in a return to our Christian roots.

In chapter 9 Scrivener explains how we now live in a society which majors on the moral values, such as equality and freedom, that it has inherited from Christianity, and that sits in judgement on those who are perceived as failing to live up to them, but that lacks 'the very heart of what Christianity has to offer: *forgiveness*.'

He then notes how:

> In the 19th century the preacher Charles Spurgeon warned about the dangers of semi-Christianity. He said 'be half a Christian and you should have enough religion to make you miserable.' He was concerned for individual churchgoers who knew enough of the Bible to understand its good advice but not its good news. They appreciated Christ's standards but not Christ's story. They therefore knew the laws but not the love – the guilt but not the grace. This did not leave them halfway happy but down-right despondent.
>
> What Spurgeon witnessed in individuals we can see in society. We have a kind of semi-Christianity in the West, and it's enough to make us miserable.

In chapter 10 Scrivener goes on to explore how the only way we can make sense of the rise of Christianity, and hence the whole history of the Western world, is by accepting the miracle of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Furthermore, when you accept the truth of this miracle and put your faith in Jesus:

> … you can embrace the most wonderful truths:
>
> that the world is loved, and loved to death;
>
> that such love is the very essence of God who is;

that behind the history you witness is a History Maker who can be trusted;

that above the values you prize is a person who embodies them;

that beneath the values you violate is the mercy to forgive you; and…

that beyond the death you must die is the life he has pioneered: resurrection.

Martin's opinion:

The Air We Breathe is an immensely timely book. The recently released census results have highlighted yet again the continuing numerical decline of Christianity in Britain. If this decline is to be halted and reversed, then what is required (apart from believing prayer) is vigorous and confident evangelism and Scrivener's book provides an excellent resource for this. It is concise, accessible, based on good scholarship and convincingly argued and it provides important challenges for the three groups that Scrivener names as his target audience. It challenges the 'Nones' (those who say they have no religion) to consider how the values they most cherish stem from Christianity and only truly make sense in the light of Jesus. It challenges the 'Dones' (those who know about Christianity but have rejected it) to consider the fact that the problems they have with Christianity (that it is 'unequal, cruel, coercive, ignorant, anti-science, restrictive or backwards') are actually 'Christian problems' in the sense that they are perceived as problems precisely because of the values taught by Christianity. Finally, it challenges the 'Wons' (those who are Christians) to be more confident in sharing their faith with others using the values they share with the rest of the modern world as a starting point. This is a book that Christians need to read, ponder, make use of, share and give away.

Commendations:

Rebecca McLaughlin declares:

> *The Air We Breathe* is a pithy, energetic and compelling exploration of how Christianity has formed our moral thinking—whether we realize it or not—and why the truth or falsehood of Christianity matters for all of us today. Whatever your current beliefs, I highly recommend you give Glen Scrivener a hearing!

Michael Ward, *After Humanity: A Guide to C.S. Lewis's The Abolition of Man*, Word on Fire Academic, ISBN 978-1-94324-377-8, £21.67 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Michael Ward is a Roman Catholic Priest who is Associate Member of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford and Professor of Apologetics at Houston Christian University, Texas. He has written extensively on the works of C S Lewis, J R R Tolkien and G K Chesterton and is best known for his book *Planet Narnia* in which he argues that Lewis structured the volumes of *The Chronicles of Narnia* so as to reflect the medieval idea of the seven heavens.

As its title makes clear, his new book is a guide to Lewis' work *The Abolition of Man*, which was published in 1943 after having been first delivered as a series of lectures at the University of Durham. Lewis himself described the *Abolition of Man,* in which he warns about the danger to the future of humanity posed by the abandonment of the ideas of objective truth and objective morality, as 'almost my favourite among my books,' and as Ward explains, since its publication it has:

> … gone on to establish a reputation as a genuine and seminal classic. It has proved to be influential with a large and diverse readership – philosophers, educators, literary critics, intellectual historians, jurists, atheists, agnostics, people of faith – and is now generally (though of course not unanimously) considered among his most perceptive, penetrating, and important pieces of writing.

However, unlike his more popular works of Christian apologetics such as *Mere Christianity*, *The Abolition of Man* is a dense philosophical argument that those who are unaware of the background to Lewis' thought can find hard to follow. Ward's aim in his book is to help such readers to understand '*what* Lewis said, *why* he said it, and *how* he did so.'

Ward's book is in eight chapters.

Chapter I looks at the reception of *The Abolition of Man* since its first publication.

Chapter II describes the Second World War context in which the book was first written and argues that it was occasioned by what Lewis saw as the 'menace' of the school of philosophical thought known as 'logical positivism' as represented by the thinkers A J Ayer and I A Richards.

Chapter III provides an overview of the contents of the book and an explanation of how Lewis' argument develops in the course of it.

Chapter IV notes that *The Abolition of Man* does not present the kind of specifically Christian position taken by Lewis in other works. However, Ward also suggests that it is nevertheless:

> … a profoundly religious argument, for behind the diversity of the moral traditions that he cites lies a strong central unifying principle – mainly, objective value, a universally recognised moral code, which requires obedience from all human beings. It is this recognition of objective value that *precedes* what we ordinarily call 'religion' (Paganism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc). Recognition of objective value is a kind of *ur*-religion underlying them all, and indeed all traditional philosophies and coherently logical systems of thought whatsoever.

According to Ward, the reason Lewis took the line he did was that:

> He was attempting to haul a subjectivist culture back not only to honest humanism, but even, if need be, to pious Paganism, for both of these standpoints had a moral substance that was superior to the vacuity of post-Christian subjectivism. Such a journey would be a long way round, but it might well turn out to be the shortest way home.

Chapter V traces the background to *The Abolition of Man* in the development of Lewis' own thought as he moved from atheism and moral subjectivism, through theism, to Christianity, and the influence upon his thought of his friend Owen Barfield and the philosopher Samuel Alexander.

Chapter VI explores the continuing influence of *The Abolition of Man* in the work of later writers such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair Macintyre.

Chapter VII provides a detailed (Ward's word is 'microscopic') commentary on key passages from *The Abolition of Man* and also explains how the ideas it contains can also be found in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Chapter VIII concludes by summarising what Ward thinks Lewis sought to achieve in *The Abolition of Man* under the four headings of 'prophecy, poetry, participation and power.' Ward argues that Lewis defends the 'Tao' (the shared belief in objective moral values found across different human cultures throughout history) :

> …not so much because it told him how to live, still less because it entitled him to tell other people how to live, but because it told him how to view death. The Tao confirms that it is far more important to die on the right side than to live on the wrong side. The worst that can happen is not death but dishonour.

As Ward sees it, this point was of personal importance to Lewis because it enabled him to try to make sense of the deaths of so many of his contemporaries on the battlefields of the First World War. Belief in the Tao helped Lewis to see that their sacrifice had not been in vain. There was an objective right for which they had died.

Martin's opinion:

As Ward suggests, Lewis' *Abolition of Man* can be considered a prophetic work in the sense that in it Lewis foresaw and critiqued the way that Western civilisation has developed since the time that it was first published. As Carl Trueman and others have argued, moral subjectivism is now the dominant idea in Western thought, finding expression in terms such as 'define your own universe', 'my truth' and 'living my best life.' Lewis' argument against this kind of thinking remains as important today as when it was first written, and Ward has done a great service by providing a comprehensive and reliable introduction to what Lewis said and the reasons why he said it. Everyone should read *The Abolition of Man* and everyone should read Ward's work as an invaluable tool to help them properly understand it and to see why it is so important.

Commendations:

Rowan Williams writes:

> C.S. Lewis's analysis of the anti-human trend of modern Western culture has perhaps even more and sharper pertinence now than when it was written. In this vigorous and widely researched book, one of our leading Lewis scholars helps us see this analysis in its full intellectual context, and confirms beyond doubt Lewis's stature as a genuine public intellectual for our own day as well as his.

Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*, Zondervan Academic, ISBN 978-0310128724, £30 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Christopher Watkin is a Christian theologian, philosopher and cultural critic who is senior lecturer in French studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. He is a scholar with an international reputation in the area of modern and contemporary European thought, atheism, and the relationship between the Bible and philosophy. His published work runs the spectrum from academic monographs on contemporary philosophy to books written for general readers, both Christian and secular, and include *Difficult Atheism*, *From Plato to Postmodernism*, *Great Thinkers: Jacques Derrida*, and others.

As he explains in his introduction, underlying his new book *Biblical Critical Theory* is his belief in the great importance of asking the question 'so what?' This, he writes, is:

> … a very useful question to ask of the doctrines of the Christian faith, and one that, perhaps, we don't pursue quite as often or with quite the rigour that we might. Let's take one example. We are taught what the final judgement is. We may well be taught how to explain it to others with some rather quaint analogies and illustrations, and perhaps we are taught how to defend and justify it. But we are less frequently – at least in my experience – taught what difference it makes to politics, to the sciences, to the arts, or to the possibility of knowledge about anything at all. We are taught the 'what?' and the 'why?' but not so much the 'so what?' The same goes for the 'so what?' of sin, judgement, promise, covenant, law, prophecy, exile, incarnation, the cross, resurrection, ascension, the last days, and the final things. *So what* for human beings? *So what* for society, for our hopes, fears, and deepest values? *So what* for art, for justice, for history, for the environment? These biblical truths, and many more besides, have far-reaching consequences in all these areas. And what is more, these consequences often bring a fresh and constructive perspective to bear on the abiding social and cultural questions of our day.

His new book is written to ask repeatedly and in detail 'so what?' As he goes on to explain:

> If it didn't sound quite so clumsy, the current book could be called *What Follows from What You Believe*, or perhaps *The Bible: So what?* There are shelves of excellent books summarising what Christians believe and why they have warned to believe it, and there are wonderful books on specific consequences of the Bible's teaching for, say, human rights or the scientific enterprise. But relatively few volumes give 'so what?' the attention lavished on 'what?' and 'why?'
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> This, then, is a book about the 'so what?' of Christian belief. My aim in these pages is to paint a picture of humanity and of our world through the lens with the Bible and to compare aspects of this image to alternative visions. It is a book about how the whole Bible sheds light on the whole of life, how we can read and understand our society, our culture, and ourselves through the lens of the Bible's storyline. It does not try to explain and defend that Bible to the culture; it seeks to analyse and critique the culture through the Bible.

Following the example set by Augustine in his master work *The City of God*, Watkin begins by describing who God is in himself as the Trinity and then tracing the Bible's story line from Genesis to Revelation, asking of each stage of the story, so what does this have to say in relation to the issues raised by contemporary Western thought and culture?

Because Watkin structures his work in this way there is no single continuous argument that runs all the way through it and this makes the book very difficult to summarise. However, three examples will serve to give a flavour of what the book as whole is like.

First, in his discussion of 'Sin and Society' in chapter 4, after working through the Biblical account of the Fall in Genesis 3, Watkin discusses the positive benefit of recognising the universality of sin:

> Let us be clear: sin is bad. It destroys relationships with the environment, with other people, and above all with God. It will be an unspeakable blessing when it is banished from the hearts of God's people in the new

> Jerusalem. But in our mourning over the reality of sin we should not miss the fact that recognising the universality of sin in the human condition also has some surprising collateral benefits. One important implication of the biblical doctrine of sin for example, is a robust affirmation of equality. The teaching that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23) actively subverts social hierarchies based on the inherently superior worth of some individuals over others. To believe that everyone is a sinner is to believe that, in one very important sense, everyone is equal and equally in need of God's grace. Equality is affirmed in creation (the image of God), in the fall (the universality of sin) and as we shall later see, in redemption (through salvation freely offered to all by God's grace).
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> Chesterton puts this surprising consequence of sin in stark relief: original sin is an 'obviously unattractive idea,' but 'when we wait for its results, they are pathos and brotherhood, and a thunder of laughter and pity; for only with original sin can we at once pity the beggar and distrust the king.'

Secondly, in chapter 18, 'The Cross, Subversion and Grace,' commenting on the taunts made to Jesus on the cross recorded in Matthew 27:40, Watkin observes that the weakness of Jesus highlighted by these taunts is not the same as failure:

> Weakness as failure in this situation might be to renounce all one's principles on the cross, wailing in agony and begging to be let down. No, Christ is not weak on the cross because he lacks strength or self-control. He is weak *by virtue* of his strength and self-control, with a weakness that the weak are too weak to show. In Christ's historical moment as in ours, there is a weakness that requires greater strength than any show of force. And yet Christianity has time and again, both historically and in our own day, been used as an instrument of that same linear oppression and exploitation that mocks Christ as he hangs on the cross. However, whenever it is so abused, 'distortion of the biblical story into an ideology of oppression has to suppress the biblical meaning of the cross.'
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> Despite the sins and abuses of Christians who claimed to act in the name of the crucified Christ, the cross itself sets the pattern for a new paradigm of triumph and victory, a triumph not in spite of nonviolence but because of it. The cross is a grand *detournement* [subversion] of the Roman warrior ethic, and of the ethic of any age that assumes there is 'no alternative' to brute force or to a regime of merciless competition. If even the brutal practise of crucifixion can be recoded as a message of love, then how much more can the petty cruelties and brutalities our own age be subverted by that very same love.

Thirdly, in chapter 24, 'The Last Days and Modernity,' Watkin builds on Paul's Areopagus address recorded in Acts 17 and declares that just as Paul told the Athenians that they did not understand the gods they were worshipping, we can say similarly today 'People of modernity! I see that in every way you think yourself irreligious, but your irreligion is very Christian.'

Developing this point, he goes on to state:

> Historically speaking, our situation is both familiar and novel. It is familiar because as the overt presence of Christianity fades in society we are returning to the position occupied by Christians in the late Roman Empire: a marginal minority viewed with suspicion and considered a danger to social cohesion. We are all in the Roman Empire now. But there is also a very great difference between Christians of the 1st century and their brothers and sisters in the 21st, namely that late modern society is soaked, steeped and cask-aged in Christian moral intuitions, Christian notions of transcendence, and a Christian view of time.
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> This leaves Christians in a peculiar situation: marginal on the surface but central to the society's undercurrents of consensus. Christian figures [ideas and ways of looking at things] are tacitly assumed and explicitly rejected by our media, politicians, and business leaders. And what is more, Christianity provides the very ethical architecture by virtue of which it is rejected. It is as if our society itself has become cross-pressured; It cannot reject Christianity without affirming its Christian moral intuitions, and it cannot affirm its 'Christian values' without corrupting them in a nation state and market that fail to substitute for a transcendent loving God.

As he sees it:

> This complex context lends the church in the last days of late modernity both a conservative and a subversive dynamic. It is conservative insofar as the moral intuitions of our society are still largely Christian, and it is subversive insofar as those intuitions have been decontextualised, isolated, and inappropriately deployed. To live in the last days is to live in a series of overlaps in tensions, between the now and the not yet, between the in and the not of, between giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, all within a culture that thinks it is rejecting Christianity at the very moment it affirms its deep and irreducible debt to Christian figures.

Martin's opinion:

This is not a book for the faint hearted. It is a long and complex work that looks in detail at how biblical teaching, and the Christian tradition stemming from it, relate to contemporary thought and contemporary society. It requires, and deserves, to be slowly and carefully read and re-read and to be pondered once it has been read. However, those who are up to the intellectual challenge of engaging with this book, and have the stamina to do so, will find themselves richly rewarded. Watkin has an encyclopaedic grasp of both the biblical message and of modern thought and culture and, as the excerpts above show, he is brilliant at showing the 'so what?' consequences of relating the two together. Part of the weakness of the Church today is that too many Christians know the Bible but can't see clearly how to apply it to our cultural moment, or understand and appreciate our culture, but can't seem to grasp the way in which the biblical message summons us to challenge and subvert it. Watkin's work provides a rich resource to counteract both these destructive trends. This is a must read for all who are equipped to do so.

Commendations:

Richard Cunningham writes:

> This is truly the book I have long wanted to read, and I believe it deserves to become a standard text for all Christian leaders, teachers, evangelists, and any serious-minded believer.