

WILLIAM WEBB'S REDEMPTIVE-MOVEMENT HERMENEUTIC: SOME CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCERNS

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How does one apply the Bible to today's life in a way that is fair to the text? This is a crucial question for Christians today. Bible readers must answer questions about cultural language and setting, literary forms such as poetry and allegory, and ultimately how these are tethered together in a way that matters for faith and practice. These questions are difficult to answer, particularly due to the futility of the human condition. Yet, this does not mean that Christians should not make a diligent attempt to answer them.

William J. Webb, formerly a New Testament professor at Heritage Seminary who is now teaching as an adjunct professor at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, has spent much of his career attempting to address these very concerns. In exploring this topic, he has authored several books including *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* and *Corporal Punishment in the Bible*. He is also currently writing a book on war texts in the Bible with InterVarsity Press.

These works are all tied to what he calls the *redemptive-movement model* (RMM) of hermeneutics, which will be discussed in this paper. First, the RMM will be summarized. Second, test cases offered by Webb for the application of the RMM will be briefly considered. Finally, the RMM will be evaluated and critiqued. The paper intends to show that the RMM, though helpful to the broader discussion on hermeneutics, is not a sustainable model for today's Christian.

THE REDEMPTIVE-MOVEMENT MODEL

Webb's primary thrust is that Christians employ a "static understanding" of the Bible. In other words, they read the Bible "*only* within [its] immediate literary context" which "creates an isolated or non-movement understanding of the Bible's ethic" and "neglects to understand its words within their larger

ancient social context.”¹ For Webb, the Bible is not simply a frozen-in-time roadmap; it is a dynamic text that moves and is meant to move beyond its own immediate historical context and original application.

Webb is concerned that by restricting the Bible to its context, readers are: 1) forcing themselves into an unnecessarily safe and certain reading of its content, and 2) limiting their potential experience of God’s ultimate ethic as a result.² In Webb’s opinion, Christian readers are convinced that a “contemporary ethic with the concrete specificity of the biblical text” has “the approval of God and thus the safety they are looking for.”³ In turn, the reader is able to paint a fully-formed picture of biblical ethics that soothes his need for a fixed explanation of troublesome or confusing texts. Webb instead argues that “Scripture seems to give *[sic]* us an ethic that needs in some ways to be developed and worked out over time.”⁴ For Webb, the RMM provides “a solution to the ethical dilemmas and hermeneutical inconsistencies” and to “ease *[his]* troubled soul as a Christian struggling with difficult texts in the Bible.”⁵ His application of this principle within the RMM is seen in several test cases.

TEST CASES FOR THE RMM

Slavery

Citing Exodus 21:20–21 (to paraphrase, “A slave owner may beat his slave but not *to death*”) as an example, Webb argues that God’s progressive ethic, tantamount to the RMM, is in full view. In the ancient Near East (ANE), there was nothing forbidding a slave owner from beating his slave to death. But this text illustrates a slight movement away from the ANE norm, presenting a picture of God moving the culture in “incremental steps toward a better treatment of human beings.”⁶ Though the ANE was riddled with poor treatment of slaves, God offered a better alternative though it was seemingly a small step forward. Further, not only did God demand that their lives be spared; he commanded freedom for and harboring of dishonored slaves.⁷ For Webb, this understanding is a useful apologetic against those who reject the Christian faith based on ostensibly harsh texts such as these.⁸

Women

In dealing with women in ANE contexts, Webb shows several ways in which the Bible reveals a “redemptive spirit.” For example, men could sell their daughters to any man they wished, most often to be used as slaves or concubines. However, Exodus 21:7–11 “limited the sale of concubines within the Isra-

1. William J. Webb, “A Redemptive-Movement Model,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 215

2. *Ibid.*, 216–17.

3. *Ibid.*, 217.

4. *Ibid.*

5. William J. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 57.

6. *Ibid.*, 224.

7. William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 74–76.

8. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible*, 63.

elite nation” and afforded them rights not customarily afforded to daughters.⁹ Additionally, the biblical text allows for abnormal opportunities in cases of family inheritance and divorce, and calls for better treatment in marriage—even in cases of adultery.¹⁰ For Webb, this is a clear depiction of God pushing the boundaries of the prevailing patriarchy of the day. He notes that the New Testament affirms the RMM in places such as Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 11:11–12, which advance additional social implications for the equality of women.¹¹

Homosexuality

Webb explains that the biblical text moves away from the homosexual practices of the ANE culture in three major ways. First, it challenged the portrait of ancient gods. Ancient gods were not known for their chastity, but Yahweh’s people imitated him in sexual restraint. Second, these ancient gods were worshiped in part through homosexual and other inappropriate acts. Deuteronomy 23:18 shows an explicit ban from such behavior. Finally, foreign nations were often significantly tolerant of homosexual practices, but there was a no-tolerance policy within the covenant community. Webb also posits that there was no softening of this stance in the New Testament community and, therefore, this practice is not moving toward Judeo-Christian acceptance.¹²

Spanking Children

ANE law codes allow for extreme violence toward children in disciplinary situations, including removal of body parts. Webb reveals his distaste for the Bible’s similar approval of leaving marks on children with rods and whips. He commends the sentiment of several prominent “no marks or bruises” and “two-smacks-max” advocates such as Albert Mohler, Andreas Kostenberger, and Focus on the Family, but is ultimately unimpressed with their conclusions.¹³ Rather, Webb suggests that Christians ought to abandon spankings altogether and instead seek alternative methods of discipline. The ANE was a “mutilation-obsessed world” and Scripture is clearly “headed toward more constructive (less destructive) means of punishment” in such texts as Deuteronomy 25:11–12, but alternative-only methods show dignity to children and present a better “witness for Jesus in an unbelieving world.”¹⁴ While some are trapped in a concrete biblical understanding of child discipline, Webb reminds readers that “God cares deeply about the discipline of children, but surely he would not scold us” for using other non-violent methods.¹⁵

SOME CONSIDERATIONS

As noted at the beginning of this paper, Webb’s RMM is a helpful addition to the hermeneutical conversation. His primary interest is to pull readers away from a fixed reading of the Bible that only

9. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, 76–77.

10. Ibid., 78–80.

11. Ibid., 86–87.

12. Ibid., 81–82.

13. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible*, 44–54.

14. Ibid., 132–35.

15. Webb, “A Redemptive-Movement Model,” 237.

accounts for cultural settings. The danger in being overly-static is superimposing all biblical texts into today's context. One must realize that there are various literary genres at play in Scripture.

Thomas Schreiner, while intensely critical of the RMM, compliments Webb in that he "rightly reminds us that hermeneutical issues are fundamental in assessing the normative status of commands and practices in the scriptures."¹⁶ For example, one must be able to read texts that include sinful actions Solomon's multiple concubines without thinking that concubines are permissible. One should also pay close attention to Jesus's culturally-driven parables and not assume that only a farmer or rich young ruler could benefit from their teaching. The Bible is not lifeless and stationary. Divine accommodation may explain some tough texts, particularly in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, the direction in which Webb takes these apprehensions is risky at best and dangerous at worst.

SOME CONCERNS

Several concerns come to mind when facing the implications of the RMM. First, perhaps the most obvious question for Webb is, why would God not give his people the ultimate ethic from the beginning? Webb replies that "God brings his people along in ways that were feasible adaptations."¹⁷ This accommodation allows people to step away from cultural norms but in ways that they (and their surrounding context) can handle. This sentiment has merit at the surface (after all, it would be rather kind of God to help his people along slowly), yet it does not bear the weight of Scripture's testimony.

In Scripture, God is not pleased to allow sin to continue. Consider a few examples: God removes Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden for their initial disobedience; he wipes out nearly the entire human race in the Flood narrative due to its overwhelming wickedness; he destroys Sodom and Gomorrah due to its ungodliness; he kills Uzzah for disobeying him in what appeared to be a harmless mistake, and he does the same to Ananias and Sapphira for lying about their tithes. Romans 1 plainly explains that God is storing up wrath against ungodliness and unrighteousness. This is does not appear to be a God ready to compromise with sinful mortals.

Using texts such as Matthew 19:1–12, in which Jesus builds upon Moses's divorce regulations in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, Webb explains that the Bible shows a "multi-level ethic" that proposes an alternative to divorce (an alternative which enhances devotion to kingdom service) as well as an additional qualification to divorce.¹⁸ One might use this to defend Webb, clarifying that he is not always dealing directly with sinful actions but also with the practical outworking of kingdom living. One could also retort that because God allows sin and imperfect discipleship to exist at all shows that he is longsuffering toward an imperfect ethic. These are both true so far as they go. Indeed, Jesus and the New Testament writers frequently advance Old Testament ethics in varieties of ways. And one should note that Jesus has not yet returned to make all things new (Rev. 21:5). This reveals that God offers undoubted grace toward fallen people. However, Jesus tells believers in Matthew 5:48 to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." It is difficult to make the claim that Jesus is on the one hand teaching slightly deficient improvements, while on the other hand telling his followers, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). He still announces and commands an ultimate ethic in the here and now.

16. Thomas R. Schreiner, "William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*: A Review Article, SBJT 6, no. 1 (2002): 47.

17. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, 255.

18. Ibid., 41–43.

Second, the trajectory of the RMM is unreliable and undefinable. If one resolves to apply this hermeneutic, he will quickly notice that there is no express end to the application. Webb admits that appropriating the RMM is “hard work” that requires grappling with “complex issues,” but that Christians should “champion [Scripture’s] redemptive spirit in new and fresh ways that logically and theologically extend its movement meaning into today’s context.”¹⁹ What is the logical and theological extent of Scripture if read through the RMM lens? This is at last left unclear. Thus, if one were to adopt the RMM and work through these complex issues, there would be no terminal use of the method. Though subjectivity plays a key role in any hermeneutical method, beginning from the position that objectivity is not attainable is discouraging at best. Christians should ask along with Daniel Doriani, “How much movement should we expect?”²⁰ There is no definitive answer.

Further, the RMM lacks satisfactory application within the Bible itself. For instance, how does the RMM explain deliberate monogamy in the Garden, tolerable polygamy in the Old Testament, described monogamy in the New Testament, and the pronounced end of marriage in the eschaton? Regarding women, Mark Strauss argues that Galatians 3:28 (“Paul’s most egalitarian statement”) is likely written earlier than 1 Timothy 2:11–15 (“his most restrictive statement”), thus reversing the order in which Webb sees the women issue heading, hence derailing the RMM’s course.²¹ Applying the RMM to either situation is untenable because it displays a variance that does not follow the linear route Webb wishes to travel. He provides many texts that fit well within the scope of RMM, but even two cursory examples—such as the textual development of marriage and the roles of women in the covenant community—can expose glaring defects. As Walter Kaiser notes regarding the child punishment texts, one must deal with progressive revelation and how texts fit together without “flattening out the Bible so that it says the same thing on the same topics everywhere.”²²

Finally, Webb’s use of source materials is questionable in two significant ways. Scripture is his primary source, and he promotes a closed canon as authoritative throughout his writings. Nevertheless, as Wayne Grudem rightly explains, the RMM does not in the end hold Scripture as the final authority, because “it nullifies in principle the moral authority of the entire NT and replaces it with the moral authority of a ‘better ethic.’”²³ Elsewhere, Grudem takes Webb to task by asserting that he cannot affirm biblical authority while claiming that “some events of Genesis 1–3 are not historically accurate.”²⁴ While responding to the same critique from Schreiner, Webb states that the New Testament is the final revelation of God, but that there is a “yet-further realization of the redemptive movement which goes beyond the whole of Scripture, including the concrete, frozen-in-time particulars of the NT.”²⁵ However, this claim is still ambiguous. It is difficult to reconcile the assertion that Scripture is the final authority for the Christian faith, while searching for a subjective application of an evolved ethic not contained within Scripture.

Webb also relies heavily on ANE and other historical sources as credibility to the assertions of the

19. Webb, “A Redemptive-Movement Model,” 247–48.

20. Daniel M. Doriani, “A Response,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 260.

21. Mark L. Strauss, “A Reflection,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, 289.

22. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “A Response,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, 251.

23. Wayne Grudem, “Review Article: Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*,” JETS 47 (2004): 346.

24. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 36.

25. William J. Webb, “The Limits of a Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: A Focused Response to T. R. Schreiner,” EQ 75, no. 4 (2003): 329.

RMM. Kevin Vanhoozer, while correctly noting that ANE sources can be helpful, is justifiably concerned that “there is an upward trajectory that begins in, yet continues beyond the specific discourse of the Bible, such that no specific statement in the Bible articulates its end point.”²⁶ These outside documents give insight into the world around the Bible and its writers, but cannot play an equal or even near-equal role to the biblical text. At some point, the canon is either the final authority or it is not. The concerns of Grudem, Schreiner, and Vanhoozer accurately reveal the RMM to be a dangerous extrabiblical hermeneutic that pays lip service to biblical authority without trusting Scripture to give Christians all they need for faith and practice.

CONCLUSION

In the end, one must admit that Webb has made a valiant effort in his attempt at helping Christians understand a Bible written far removed from their context. His arguments throughout his most prominent published works are often logical within the texts and situations he employs. His work is not in vain; many prominent theologians—such as those mentioned in this paper—have read and considered the RMM at length. While many disagree, not many would say that Webb is an irrelevant scholar.

That said, the RMM hinders instead of enhancing the modern Christian’s attempt at applying the Bible to their context. While the method seems to have merit on the surface, its subjectivity leaves the reader stuck in the quandary of figuring out how a text might apply beyond the canon. In the case of slavery, one does not know if it should be abolished today or if there is a more amenable option for masters and slaves to work together. In the case of women, there is no way to tell if women should or should not have, for example, leadership positions in the church. Have all distinctions been abolished? We cannot know. In the case of homosexuals, it is promising that Webb does not find affirmation within the framework of the RMM. Still, the American culture is acquiescing to homosexuality, so is it the case that God’s better ethic is taking form? In the case of spanking children, the RMM seems to lead to a total lack of discipline at some point in the future. Should we move beyond even the non-violent forms of punishment that Webb proposes? Are Webb’s proposals not still promoting emotional abuse? What if God is progressing us away from discipline altogether? The questions are legion.

In the end, the Christian cannot rely on the RMM to answer the tough texts of the Bible. When working to explain slavery in the Bible, employing a hermeneutic that stitches together multiple extra-biblical ethical interpretation is not the answer. Webb argues again and again that the RMM is not a simple way to read the Bible, but is worth the arduous work. It is more likely that it is arduous, and that it fundamentally cannot deliver on its promises.

26. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Response,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 266-67.