

## Review of William J. Webb's "Corporal Punishment in the Bible"

Josh Heimiller

Associate Faculty, University of Phoenix, Central Valley Campus

**Abstract:** Ancient religious texts often contain passages that are troubling to the ears of the modern interpreter. This is certainly the case when it comes to biblical passages that call for the corporal punishment of children, slaves, and lawbreakers. In his most recent book, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts*, William J. Webb offers to help modern interpreters better understand these troubling passages. This book review provides an analysis of Webb's discussion of corporal punishment that explores the strengths and weaknesses of his arguments.

**Key Words:** biblical interpretation, hermeneutics, Ancient Near East, Christianity, Bible

Ancient religious texts often contain passages that are troubling to the ears of the modern interpreter. This is certainly the case when it comes to biblical passages that call for the corporal punishment of children, slaves, and lawbreakers. In his most recent book, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts*, William J. Webb offers to help modern interpreters better understand these troubling passages. Webb, who is an adjunct professor of New Testament and biblical studies at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, first introduced his redemptive-movement hermeneutic in *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*.<sup>1</sup> This earlier work

---

<sup>1</sup> William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001)

began his “redemptive-movement journey”<sup>2</sup> and proved to be helpful for interpreting some of the most controversial texts in the Bible. Webb’s latest work applies this same redemptive-movement hermeneutic to the hotly debated issue of corporal punishment.

In his introduction entitled “A Troubled Christian Soul,” Webb explains his personal difficulty in reconciling the Bible’s teaching about corporal punishment with his ethics as a contemporary Christian.<sup>3</sup> His reflection upon these issues has culminated in this book that “offers a case study within the corporal punishment texts about how Christians ought to interpret and apply Scripture.”<sup>4</sup>

“Part I: Troubling Texts” deals with the difficulty of consistently applying the corporal punishment texts in the Bible to modern life.<sup>5</sup> A number of troubling texts are introduced including the “beating with a rod” texts from Proverbs (Proverbs 13:24, 19:18, 22:15, 23:13-14, 29:15, 29:17), a passage that establishes physical beatings for Torah violators (Deuteronomy 25:1-3), and a text that supports the beating of slaves (Exodus 21:20-21). The challenging question being asked is what are we to do with these texts that so blatantly offend our modern moral code?

Next, Webb critically examines the arguments of those who use the corporal punishment texts in the Bible to endorse the practice of spanking. He specifically targets James Dobson, Wayne Grudem, Andreas Köstenberger, Al Mohler, and Paul Wegner. He points out that these spanking advocates impose a number of

---

<sup>2</sup> Webb uses this description on his website “Redemptive Christianity.” Accessed February 2, 2012. [http://redemptivechristianity.com/?page\\_id=17](http://redemptivechristianity.com/?page_id=17)

<sup>3</sup> William J. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 17-22

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 21

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 25-54

restrictions in the use of corporal punishment including age, the number of spankings, the location of spankings, and the instrument used for spanking. Webb is thankful for these limitations but rightly notes that such restrictions are not derived from the biblical passages in question. How can spanking advocates claim that their position is biblical when the corporal punishment texts in the Bible call for a much stricter application of discipline?

“Part II: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic” is the heart of the book.<sup>6</sup> First, the reader is acquainted with the redemptive-movement hermeneutic by looking at slavery texts within the Bible. Webb places his redemptive-movement hermeneutic within the well-established grammatical-historical approach to biblical interpretation, aiming to strengthen the historical side of this method. Webb convincingly argues that the best way to apply the Bible to life today is to look for its redemptive spirit since every biblical text is written within a particular cultural context. Thus, the goal of the redemptive-movement hermeneutic is to compare the biblical text to its broader cultural context. According to Webb, the biblical text always moves in a redemptive direction when compared with the surrounding culture.

When the slavery texts in the Bible are read against their Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman background, some very significant improvements for slaves emerge: holidays were granted to slaves (including the weekly Sabbath), slaves were included in the worship setting, no-interest loans were established to prevent debt slavery, legislation established the release of Hebrew debt slaves after a certain

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 57-93

number of years, material assistance was given to released slaves, limitations were placed on the severity of physical beatings, masters were encouraged to show genuine care for their slaves, foreign countries were denounced for stealing people in order to trade them as slaves, and scriptural restrictions made Israel a refuge for many runaway slaves. Webb concludes that, "These biblical modifications to the existing social norms brought greater protection and dignity for the slave. This improvement in the conditions of slaves relative to the original culture was clearly a redemptive action on the part of Scripture."<sup>7</sup>

After establishing his redemptive-movement hermeneutic with the slavery texts, Webb turns his attention to the corporal punishment texts. As one might expect, when the corporal punishment texts in the Bible are read within the larger context of the Ancient Near East, the redemptive movement is clear. Webb compares corporal punishment texts from Egypt and Assyria with those found in the Bible in a compelling assessment that demonstrates that corporal punishment texts in the Bible are much less severe. The biblical text limits the number of blows to forty while the surrounding culture was often administering upwards of 200 blows. The Bible also requires that the number of blows is proportionate to the offense and states a concern for the dignity of the offender. Webb finishes this section by arguing that Christian spanking advocates have already applied the redemptive-movement of the Bible to their spanking ethic. They have instinctively placed restrictions on the practice of spanking to bring corporal punishment in a

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 69

redemptive direction. Webb would like to move even further toward the ultimate ethic to which the Bible's redemptive movement is pointing.

"Part III: Lingering Questions" contains two questions that follow from what Webb has written thus far.<sup>8</sup> First Webb addresses the question "What about adult corporal punishment?" Throughout this chapter, which is aimed at those who might misconstrue his main point, Webb carefully reinforces his argument that Christians today should continue on the redemptive-movement path rather than try to apply the instructions of the Bible in an overly literal manner. He once again meticulously compares a biblical text (Deuteronomy 25:11-12) with similar texts in the surrounding culture (Sumerian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Anatolian mutilation laws).

Next Webb answers the question "What about using only noncorporal methods for children?" He argues that following the redemptive-movement hermeneutic leads us to an ultimate ethic of only using noncorporal methods for child discipline. He makes the analogy that just as the ultimate ethic of the Bible is the abolition of slavery rather than a "nicer" form of slavery, the ultimate ethic of the Bible is the elimination of corporal punishment instead of a "nicer" form of corporal punishment.

The book also contains a brief conclusion urging interpreters to use a redemptive-movement hermeneutic,<sup>9</sup> a postscript filled with noncorporal

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 97-137

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 138-139

disciplinary advice for parents,<sup>10</sup> and an appendix which includes a response to Andreas Köstenberger's objections to Webb's treatment of corporal punishment texts.<sup>11</sup> The book's final pages contain a helpful bibliography for those desiring further research on the subject as well as author and scripture indices that make the book very reader friendly.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars and students in the fields of Biblical Studies, Theology, and Religious Studies will benefit from this well researched and thought-provoking work. At the same time, the book is not overly technical and will surely reach a wider audience. Although this book contains a surprising amount of exegetical and cultural-historical detail, Webb's writing style makes for easy reading. Attractive charts summarizing central information make it easy for the reader to follow and assimilate the author's main points. These features make *Corporal Punishment in the Bible* a helpful resource for anyone who is trying to make sense of these disconcerting passages.

Even with all of its strengths, there are a couple of possible shortcomings to be mentioned. Webb uses a very gracious tone toward those opposing his viewpoint, but he does not give much space to their arguments.<sup>13</sup> He convincingly argues that if pro-spankers are open to a redemptive-movement hermeneutic they will move toward noncorporal methods of child discipline. However, it is not entirely clear that a redemptive-movement hermeneutic is superior to the hermeneutic of pro-

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 140-173

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 174-182

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 183-192

<sup>13</sup> The appendix does give some attention to the hermeneutic used by Andreas Köstenberger, but it is largely a defense of Webb's own method.

spankers since Webb does not inform us about the kind of hermeneutic pro-spankers are using to support their arguments. I suspect that the redemptive-movement hermeneutic is in fact superior, but a little more balance in this area would have made Webb's argument even stronger. Another possible area of weakness is that while the redemptive-movement hermeneutic does lessen some of the offensiveness of the corporal punishment texts, many people will still find these passages troubling. Even though the Bible's instructions are less violent than the surrounding culture, the fact still remains that the biblical text was endorsing what most people today would consider abusive behavior. Webb does not deal with this remaining issue in any significant way. Finally, some will take issue with Webb's assumptions about the inspiration and reliability of the Bible. It is not explicitly stated, but Webb is writing as an Evangelical Christian scholar to an Evangelical Christian audience. Despite Webb's lack of disclosure regarding his religious perspective, those holding other viewpoints should not be afraid to pick up this book since they will find within it a wealth of helpful and enlightening information even if they do not share the author's assumptions.

*Corporal Punishment in the Bible* is a helpful resource for dealing with troubling texts in the Bible. The book offers a great reminder that ancient religious texts must be read in their cultural-historical setting to be properly understood. Someone looking for a primer on how to interpret the Bible contextually would do well to pick up a copy of *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* or *Corporal Punishment in the Bible*. I anticipate that Webb's future work, including his forthcoming *Bloody*,

*Brutal, and Barbaric: War Texts that Trouble the Soul*,<sup>14</sup> will continue to contribute to our understanding of biblical passages that offend our modern sensibilities.

---

<sup>14</sup> William J. Webb, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric: War Texts that Trouble the Soul* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming)

### **Bibliography**

- Webb, William J. *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric: War Texts that Trouble the Soul*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming.
- Webb, William J. *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011.
- Webb, William J. *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001.