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Review of Webb's "Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis"

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Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis. By William J. Webb. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001, 301 pp., \$24.99 paper.

A student recently intercepted me in my office to ply me with the question of how one is supposed to make sense of Leviticus 27. In the context of a section dealing with redeeming vows, the text ascribes lesser monetary value to women than to men. The student asked, "Even if that might possibly be referring to the relatively greater productivity potential of males by virtue of their increased physical strength, which such an agrarian culture would understandably prize, it still says, *'The Lord said . . .'* How can one dismiss such a text as 'cultural' and therefore irrelevant for our time when it comes 'packaged' with divine sanction like that?" Our interchange raised the ever-relevant question not only of how one determines what in Scripture is culturally bound but also in what sense or on what level even those texts which are deemed as such can be revelatory.

Shortly thereafter I sat down to tackle William Webb's intriguing tome curiously (at first glance) titled *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*. What I had been trying to convey to my student inquirer found clear, cogent articulation in this engaging and well-researched work. The book begins with an illuminating introductory discussion of the role of culture in the formation of the biblical text and a brief delineation of various options regarding two of the most controversial issues facing the church today: women and homosexuality. Then he proceeds to articulate and apply each of 18 hermeneutical criteria first toward neutral examples (many of which revolve around the now largely defused issue of slavery) before turning his sights toward the application of each criterion to the issues of women and homosexuality, respectively, followed by evaluative and summative comments. With sensitivity to the varying range of each criterion's compelling quality, the author innovatively clusters the criteria under the following four categories: persuasive, moderately persuasive, inconclusive, and extrascriptural. Thus the reader is plunged into the world of hermeneutics using the profitable methodology of applying this multifaceted interpretive grid in case-study fashion to each of the three subject areas identified in the book's title.

In this book Webb offers a guide by which to differentiate elements in the biblical text that are culturally bound from those which are transcultural. The aim is to assist the reader in discerning what should legitimately be applied today and what should be discontinued. Such a roadmap entails not only careful exegesis of the literary-historical factors inherent in a text but also attentiveness to the ways in which the original text was culturally formed as well as sensitivity to how the spirit of the text can be faithfully conveyed in terms pertinent to our modern culture. To accomplish this, Webb argues for an approach to biblical interpretation that goes beyond a "static hermeneutic," which analyzes isolated words in a text and then attempts to find cultural equivalents for today. Such a static approach would, for example, extract the injunction given to slaves to "submit to" and "obey" their masters and then proceed to apply it to modern-day employee-employer relations, even to the grotesque extent of submitting to physical beatings from one's employer for the sake of the gospel, as urged in 1 Pet 2:18–25. What is needed, according to Webb, is what he calls a "redemptive-movement" hermeneutic that not only attends to a careful exegesis of the words within a given text but also seeks "to engage the redemptive spirit of the text in a way that moves the contemporary appropriation of the text beyond its original-application framing" (p. 30).

While this model might seem to bear striking similarity to the "liberative criterion" employed as part of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" approach championed by feminists such as Rosemary Radford Reuther (i.e. only what is deemed "liberative" in a text is held to be authoritative), it is distinct from such an approach in several ways. First, the redemptive spirit cannot be extracted from the words as if it were detachable from the text, nor can it be imposed from beyond the text. The spirit of a text is not antithetical to the words but rather fused together with them. Secondly, Webb's model affirms the authoritative bearing of all Scripture while at the same time recognizing the possibility of a multi-level ethic pervading various biblical texts. Thus, for example, while divorce stands clearly against the ideal ethic of lifelong covenantal marriage, the divorce legislation of Deut 24:1–4 exhibits a redemptive dynamic by taking into account the reality of living in a world of fallen relationships and consequently setting forth ethical prescriptions that were meant to accord unprecedented rights for the wife and restrain the damage such marital ruptures could inflict on each party. The multi-level ethic and redemptive movement are clearly captured by the following summary statement: "If one carries the spirit of limiting damages and reducing alienation within human relationships to its logical conclusion, one ends up with the ideal of restored, loving relationships" (p. 42). The trajectory in this model is an increasingly redemptive

movement from the past toward an ultimate future ideal via the present, perceivable even in “ugly texts” that appear in their original formulation to be irredeemably sexist and oppressive by current standards.

Such is the underlying drumbeat sounding forth throughout this book. While Webb’s conclusions clearly favor a “complementary egalitarian” perspective with respect to the texts addressing women’s issues, he is not unsympathetic to what he terms the “ultra-soft patriarchal” view. Not all will be convinced by his detection of implicit “hints of patriarchy” in the original pre-fall narratives of Genesis 1 and 2, though he acknowledges that these only find explicit expression in the post-fall account of Genesis 3. Egalitarians might contest arguments prohibiting women from exercising authoritative teaching roles in the church (e.g. 1 Tim 2:11–15) that appear to hinge upon the debatable premise that Genesis 2 attaches superior status to the male by virtue of having been created prior to the woman. Paul’s highlighting of male/female *interdependence* in 1 Cor 11:11–12 surely relativizes the significance of the order of creation argument in terms of gender status. Even while conceding the possibility of such patriarchal “whispers,” Webb helpfully highlights numerous scriptural “breakouts” in which primogeniture logic is overturned, as God periodically “abandons the norm of granting greater status and honor to those first within the ‘creative order’” (p. 136). Furthermore, Webb’s opting for a “complementary egalitarian” position (in contradistinction to “secular egalitarianism”) affirms his view that “men and women can and should function in complementary ways” (p. 241). Aside from the sole example given of women’s irreplaceable role in the early stages of childrearing, there is little hint given as to how this complementary role configuration is to be determined. It would have been profitable perhaps to venture some correlation between the concept of complementary roles and giftedness. Whose role is it to take charge of family finances, for instance? What is involved in “fleshing out” concretely this ideal of complementarity? His recognition for the “need to tread softly” shows commendable caution to avoid rigid role delineations derived largely from gender stereotyping.

Given Webb’s reliance on the “redemptive-movement,” one might wonder if such logic could lend advocacy to monogamous, covenantal homosexuality on the basis of a redemptive spirit blowing through seemingly prohibitive texts similar to that discernible in texts seemingly constrictive of women’s roles. However, it soon becomes apparent that while such question marks can arise within the presentation of any given criterion, the cumulative force of the designated criteria taken together provides a compelling case for a redemptive trajectory that, unlike that of slavery and women’s issues, moves not in the direction of less restriction but rather total prohibition. I found his sensitivity to recent research suggesting possible biological and environmental factors that might contribute to a non-voluntary homosexual *orientation* especially illuminating. While not compromising his conviction that biblical injunctions against homosexual *activity* are transcultural and therefore binding today, he suggests a “sliding scale of culpability” by which to regard those who struggle with homosexual inclinations. Not all readers will be comfortable with that phrase, suspicious that it smuggles in the back door a measure of approbation that he has just disallowed. I, however, found that expression refreshingly nuanced in a manner that both upholds biblical authority and extends the kind of compassion mandated by Christ in his teachings and modeled by personal example.

An inclusion of numerous charts and diagrams assists the reader in tracking with the author’s key concepts. Especially impressive is Webb’s even-handed, fair treatment of the interpretive options and counter-arguments. In addition, a commendable display of scholarly humility is clearly evident in a concluding chapter disarmingly titled “What If I Am Wrong?” Reminiscent of Karl Barth’s exhortation to scholars to extend the purview of forgiving grace to include not only one’s own theological sins but those of one’s

fellow theologians, Webb's disclaimer reminds the reader that even the most carefully crafted argument must nevertheless be situated contextually within the human condition of "seeing through a glass darkly." Readers will be amply rewarded with a careful reading of this important and timely contribution to the field of biblical hermeneutics.

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