

Liberating Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals

*Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis | By William J. Webb |
Reviewed by Joseph B. Modica*

William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* is a hermeneutical tour de force. Webb severs ties with traditional hermeneutical textbooks by offering intra-scriptural and extra-scriptural criteria and a case study approach (akin to W. M. Swartley's *Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women*) rather than a step-by-step methodology. Webb tackles these issues collectively (i.e., there is no specific chapter on homosexual hermeneutical issues), modeling that interpretative issues need to be grappled with corporately (read here biblically—both testaments) rather than individually, as isolated pericopes. Exhaustive word analyses rarely win hermeneutical arguments (think of all the ink spilled on the Greek word headship); rather, it is reading texts holistically (vis-à-vis “cultural analysis”) that determines interpretation.

Webb's holistic approach is a redemptive-movement hermeneutic that is the engagement of “the redemptive spirit of the text in a way that moves the contemporary appropriation of the text beyond its original-application framing” (p. 30). A key component of a redemptive movement is the idea of movement. Thus, Webb sketches this movement as an “XYZ model,” beginning with the Original Culture (X) → Bible (Y) → Our Culture → Ultimate Ethic (Z). Webb then appropriates eighteen criteria, ranging from seed ideas (persuasive criterion) to contextual comparisons (inconclusive criterion) to evaluate interpretive issues indicated in the title of his book.

Webb's most stimulating chapter is his final one: “What If I Am Wrong?” where he develops his default position, or, in other words, plays “devil's advocate.” I appreciate his disposition here. Often hermeneutical textbooks suffer from foreclosure, rather than foresight, when involved knotty interpretative issues are involved. This is not to say Webb is hermeneutically ambiguous and adrift: he makes decisions based on his criteria. But he is also aware of the complexity of the cultural issues. He maintains a “complementary egalitarian” position on women, yet notes that “ultra-soft patriarchy” is a “significant possibility” (p. 250). This kind of dialogue (and courage) is needed by more biblical scholars.

Webb's book should be read, discussed, and digested by everyone who is interested in understanding what Krister Stendahl once remarked forty years ago as the descriptive task of biblical theology: the process of moving from “what it [the text] meant” to “what it means.” This is a critical journey to embark upon as Christians, especially in a culture that diminishes the authority of the Bible. Webb is an outstanding tour guide. Let the journey begin!

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