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C O R P O R A L  
P U N I S H M E N T  
I N T H E B I B L E

A Redemptive-Movement  
Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts

W I L L I A M J . W E B B

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*While all stories in this book are true, some names and identifying information have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.*

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To Marilyn,

My friend and companion in a twenty-four-year  
adventure of raising children. You have taken this book  
on hermeneutics and lived out its concepts with far more  
grace and beauty than the world of academic theory.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by I. Howard Marshall . . . . .	9
Acknowledgments. . . . .	13
Abbreviations . . . . .	15
Introduction: <i>A Troubled Christian Soul</i> . . . . .	17
<b>Part I: Troubling Texts</b>	
1 Biblical Texts, Ethical Dilemmas and Hermeneutical Inconsistencies . . . . .	25
<b>Part II: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic</b>	
2 The Slavery Texts: <i>A Redemptive-Movement Model</i> . . . . .	57
3 The Rod and Whip Texts: <i>A Biblical Basis for Going Beyond</i> . . . . .	74
<b>Part III: Lingering Questions</b>	
4 What About Adult Corporal Punishment? . . . . .	97
5 What About Using Only Noncorporal Methods for Children? . . . . .	119
Conclusion: <i>Dare to Read the Bible Differently</i> . . . . .	138
Postscript: <i>An Unplanned Parenting Journey</i> . . . . .	140
Appendix: <i>A Response to Andreas Köstenberger</i> . . . . .	174
Bibliography. . . . .	183
Author Index . . . . .	189
Scripture Index . . . . .	191

## FOREWORD

Fairly early on in my school experience we had a teacher named Mr. Macdonald (known behind his back as “Dornieboy”), who was notorious for his use of the tawse (Scots for the “belt”) administered on the palm of the hand for every misdemeanor, including in particular the scoring of a lower grade than his arbitrarily chosen pass mark in every class exercise and assignment. I never thought that it was wrong to punish pupils for disobedience and bad behavior, but I could not see how it was just for pupils to be punished for not reaching grades that were inherently beyond their capabilities. Fortunately I never fell into his clutches, but I was absolutely scared stiff lest I ever should do so (I was a coward regarding suffering and enduring pain), and he figured in my nightmares from time to time. Other people’s recollections of early education in Scotland indicate that my Dumfries experience of inhumane teachers was far from exceptional.

Today the situation in Scotland is radically different, and a teacher can be dismissed for anything that remotely resembles physical action against unruly pupils even if they are acting violently and need to be restrained, and we may well wonder whether the sanctions against such behavior are realistic and adequate.

But what about the situation in the home, where parents may also be in danger of prosecution if they physically chastise their children? Particularly in North America there are Christians who affirm strongly

the duty of parents to use physical chastisement on the basis of Scripture. Are those who differ from them to be regarded as disobeying biblical teaching and succumbing to secular liberalism?

This is the issue taken up in this book by Bill Webb, who makes a number of points. First, he demonstrates that those who claim to be following Scripture by advocating and practicing corporal punishment within the family in fact go “beyond Scripture” by making a number of corrections of Scriptural practice that make such chastisement significantly different with respect to its severity and general character. He applauds this shift. Second, he argues that in fact Scripture shows a redemptive trajectory when compared with the practices of other ancient people, and that all of those who reduce the severity of corporal punishment are taking further that trajectory which began in Scripture and has not yet reached its zenith. Third, he argues for the nonuse of corporal punishment and describes in helpful detail other strategies that have been tried and tested in his wife’s and his own experience with their own family (including the care of a son with severe learning difficulties), so that the same scriptural aim of teaching children to practice good behavior is attainable by other sanctions that are free from the criticisms that can rightly be made of corporal punishment.

The argument is thus a specific example of the kind of biblical hermeneutics advocated in the author’s earlier writings, especially his *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* but also as summarized in his contribution to *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, edited by Gary Meadors. But where these other works tend to be more academic in their approach, this book has added a nonacademic postscript written at a more down-to-earth level, with an abundance of personal insight and experience as well as practical application that parents will find helpful. (I could have profited much from it if it had been published when Joyce and I were bringing up our four children.) Moreover, the approach is conciliatory and gracious toward those who are gently but firmly corrected for not realizing that their approach to Scripture does in fact lead them to move beyond what Scripture says while holding to the supreme authority of Scripture. Thus the book offers a com-

elling example of the basic rightness of Bill's approach to the problem of applying Scripture to such issues as "slavery, women and homosexuals," and so it will help to commend this hermeneutical key to those who may have been suspicious of it in the past. And that in its turn will forward what matters most to the author: the development and practice of behavior that is truly biblical and Christian, and so pleasing and glorifying to God as well as commending the gospel to the people.

In short, I enjoyed the book and could not put it down once I started to read it.

*I. Howard Marshall*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has come into being through the contributions of many people. I must thank the staff at InterVarsity Press for their unfailing patience in working with probably the most delinquent author they have ever signed on. When we got the diagnosis of leukodystrophy with Jon (our oldest son), it meant a lot of changes for our family. Andy Le Peau and Gary Deddo met with me several times, once in San Diego with both Marilyn and myself. They prayed with us and assured us that they wanted to see a couple of “overdue books” come to completion. To my surprise they were not interested in closing out the overdue contracts. As of last summer Jon is now in a full-time care home just north of Waterloo, Ontario, and our lives are beginning to return to normal. I must express special thanks to Gary for helping me articulate the intersecting relationship between ethics and hermeneutics in an explicit fashion—some things remain dormant in one’s mind until a perceptive editor offers some prodding questions. So thanks from myself and Marilyn to the entire IVP staff for your encouragement and blessing in our lives.

Many academic colleagues and friends have read over some or all of the chapters in this book. I thank my colleagues at Heritage College and Seminary for an unforgettable twenty-two-year pilgrimage together—their support and delightful exchange have made those years a cherished memory. I want to especially thank those who read and of-

ferred feedback on this book during its formation—Gord Oeste, Kelvin Mutter, Stan Fowler, David Smith, Cyril Guerette, David Barker, Paul Wilson, Cheryl Belch and Jim Cianca. I was also fortunate to receive input from several persons in pastoral ministry—in particular I wish to thank Rod Casey for his sustained encouragement and perceptive interaction. Mart DeHaan was kind enough to read the manuscript several times during its early stages and assist me in some crucial communication issues. Two gifted editors—Dorian Coover-Cox and Robert L. Webb—gave countless hours helping me write clearly and choose apt words. Their generous labors and friendship have been an inspiration and have produced a much better manuscript. In the final hours of finishing this project, when I was swamped with some other pressing matters, my youngest son, Joel (now a first-year university student!), gladly pitched in and developed the author index—a more wonderful gift I could not have had.

Finally, there is a group of close friends known as our “gourm club”—made up of Christians from various walks of life (*gourm* is short for gourmet). This eclectic group of five couples includes a teacher, a principal, a teaching assistant, four professors, a financial adviser, an administrative assistant, and a family and marriage counselor. We meet a half dozen times throughout the year and cook some fabulous dinners over four or five hours of conversation. The contents of these chapters were often bantered around among these long-time friends in both a playful and serious manner, depending on the moment. These friends stood with me through this past year, which has been a challenging period of transition.

At the end of this year I find myself as an adjunct professor at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Ontario. This acclaimed seminary within Canada has been gracious in offering me an academic home. I wish to thank the faculty of Tyndale Seminary and in particular the dean, Janet Clark, for your kind welcome and for giving me a place to hang my hat. I am indeed grateful to them.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ANE	Ancient Near East(ern)
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
HL	Hittite Laws
ITC	International Theological Commentary
LH	Laws of Hammurabi
MAL	Middle Assyrian Laws
MAPD	Middle Assyrian Palace Decrees
MH Letters	Middle Hittite Letters
NAC	New American Commentary
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTS	Old Testament Studies
SBL	Studies in Biblical Literature
SHBC	Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum

## INTRODUCTION

### A TROUBLED CHRISTIAN SOUL

**W**ithin the Bible we encounter three very stark instruments of corporal punishment: the rod, the whip and the heavy knife. By far the rod and whip are mentioned most frequently. In one particular case, however, Scripture infers the use of a heavy knife or perhaps an ax for the cutting off of a woman's hand (Deut 25:11-12). As contemporary Christians read and ponder the biblical instructions pertaining to the rod, the whip and the heavy knife, they are likely to struggle with what they find.

If I am the only person in the world who is troubled by the corporal punishment texts in the Bible, then I might as well climb into a sound-proof room and from the depths of my lamenting heart read these pages to myself and to God. However, I know from speaking with other Christians that many share the feeling of a troubled soul, and thus my attempt here is to speak to a wider audience about the issues that cause this spiritual disquiet. After hearing two contemporary stories, we will turn to Scripture and encounter a difficult reality—an unsettling juxtaposition of values.

### TWO STORIES

The first story is about a six-year-old boy whom I have never met. Roughly a month before I finished this book, I came across a news article that described a man in Fredericton, New Brunswick (Canada), being given a forty-five-day jail sentence for spanking his son. As I read

the article more closely, it became clear that the man was not being jailed simply for spanking his six-year-old child but for doing so in a manner that left behind bruising marks.<sup>1</sup> Here in Canada, if a parent spansks and leaves bruising welts and marks, Family and Child Services (a government agency) can and often do take children away from the parents. “Leaving marks” corporal punishment is viewed as abusive treatment. The situation is essentially no different in the United States, Europe and other Western countries. While Christians today might debate the length of the jail sentence or other particulars in this case, one conclusion is broadly shared among present-day believers. Almost all Christians—even pro-spankers today—view the leaving of marks as an abusive parenting action. We are saddened when we read about a six-year-old having been beaten by his father in this fashion.

The second story is a lot closer to home for me. It is a story about a young man named Fanosie—a former Ethiopian student of mine who is extremely bright and possesses a warm and inspiring pastoral heart.<sup>2</sup> Over his time as an M.Div. student we became very good friends, and Marilyn and I enjoyed getting to know Fanosie and his wife in various contexts—our home, their home, local Ethiopian restaurants and campus discussions. After gentle arm twisting by Fanosie, a couple of summers ago I went to teach for a month in two Ethiopian evangelical seminaries—one seminary right in the capital city of Addis Ababa and one seminary just to the south of Addis, about one hour’s travel, with the wildest highway driving I have ever experienced.

As I was preparing for the Ethiopia trip, I gave Fanosie several chapters of this book on corporal punishment, asking for his feedback. More specifically, I asked if I should take this material to Addis and teach some of it there. About a week or two later, I bumped into Fanosie in the foyer of our seminary and asked him what he thought about the chapters. I still remember his vivid answer. He said nothing, nothing at all. Instead, Fanosie bent down his head and showed me a series of welts, scars and ugly disfigurements. He is tall man and his dark curly

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<sup>1</sup>“N.B. Man Jailed for Spanking Son,” *CBC News*, February 2, 2010. The article can be accessed at <[www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/story/2010/02/02/nb-spanking-sentencing.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/story/2010/02/02/nb-spanking-sentencing.html)>.

<sup>2</sup>This story has been cited with Fanosie’s written consent.

hair hid these marks fairly well. He explained to me that he could take off his clothes and show me more marks from beatings he had as a child. He described being raised in a typical Christian home, and how, not infrequently, his father beat him with a stick. In fact, Fanosie told how it was still acceptable for many Christian husbands in Ethiopia to beat their wives as an act of corrective discipline. I stood there shocked and unable to speak. When I found my voice again, I said to Fanosie, “I am not sure I know exactly what you are telling me. Are you saying this topic is going to be too explosive and I should not take these chapters?” He looked at me and said, “No. You *must* teach this in Ethiopia!” In addition to the seminary classes on biblical interpretation that I had lined up for weekdays, Fanosie arranged a three-hour Saturday morning session for Ethiopian pastors and church leaders along with seminary students and local professors. The topic he chose for this widest audience was from the pages contained in this book. I will never forget that Saturday morning.<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to say that the topic addressed a keenly felt need as Fanosie had anticipated.

But there is something far more important for us to focus on. We must now connect these two stories to the Bible. We need to relate the marks and bruises left from physical beatings of the Fredericton child and of Fanosie to what is taught in Scripture about corporal punishment.

## TURNING TO SCRIPTURE

Here is how a troubled soul arises. On the one hand, I feel angry and upset about what happened to the young Fredericton boy. And I feel outraged about what my friend Fanosie experienced in his home. I ask myself, *What sort of parents would discipline their kids so that they leave these*

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<sup>3</sup>After the closing prayer, my son (Joel) and I were literally mobbed for a few handouts that I left up front for those who might be interested in further reading. Due to the audience pressing for this pile of handouts and some wanting to talk with us, we virtually could not move for several minutes. At the moment I stood there and thought, “Well, of course photocopying is expensive in Ethiopia and maybe there are other cultural components that I do not understand.” However, several people later explained that this response was not typical for such a Christian leadership gathering held in a seminary campus setting. As Fanosie had anticipated, the topic had clearly hit a nerve. The audience was eager to think through a different approach to applying the Bible in this area of corporal punishment.

*kinds of bruises and markings?* This sort of corporal punishment is wrong and abusive. But then I turn to the pages of Scripture and discover something that greatly troubles my Christian soul. It leaves me shaking my head and confused about the God I believe in and cherish. Rather than being strengthened in my faith, I am puzzled and disturbed.

I discover that the Bible does not view the leaving of marks and bruises from a beating as abusive. Instead of seeing them as deplorable, the Bible regards them as a virtue in that they signify a good and effective beating. In the first chapter on “seven ways” we will look at one biblical proverb (Prov 20:30) that teaches this perspective on physical beatings. Since the recipient of the beating in Proverbs 20:30 is not explicitly described (whether adult or child), I would like to think that this biblical text is talking about adult beatings and not about the beating of children. This would alleviate at least *some* of the ethical tension. Alas, I fear that such a limited, adult-only understanding of the biblical proverb is wishful thinking on my part. I will explain why in the first chapter.

Although I am taught within Scripture that marks from physical beatings are a virtue, somehow I cannot tear myself away from what I have always held, namely, that such actions are abusive. But the struggle only begins here. This one troubling component within the corporal punishment texts in the Bible is just a start. There is much more that is ethically problematic. We will explore a range of biblical teaching about the rod and whip (chap. 1) and about the heavy knife (chap. 4) that should cause us to rethink how we move from ancient biblical texts to an application of those texts for today.

## A BOOK ABOUT HERMENEUTICS

Let me warn you that this is *not* a book about parenting techniques. If you want a limited discussion of parenting practices related to discipline, I have included a postscript called “An Unplanned Parenting Journey.” (Readers interested primarily in the perplexing hermeneutical questions can skip that material if they wish.) Rather, this book is about how to read and understand the Bible. The book captures the *hermeneutical* journey of Marilyn (my wife) and me as we have raised our

three children. We did not see it coming. We did not in any way anticipate this “reading Scripture” pilgrimage in our lives as parents. It was quite literally an unplanned journey about how to interpret and apply Scripture.

Let me describe our hermeneutical journey this way—it was as if we were walking backward, stumbling along in the dark and quite by accident we started bumping into the findings of this book. To be sure, we *thought* we were disciplining our children in a manner that was taught in Scripture. But much to our surprise we discovered that the spanking-type discipline we were practicing had very little correlation to what the Bible actually taught about corporal punishment. To our further dismay, as we began digging into the teaching of Scripture on corporal punishment (the rod, the whip and the heavy knife), we discovered various texts and biblical instructions that were deeply disturbing. The corporal punishment passages in the Bible indeed began to trouble our Christian souls.

For a brief moment, let me jump ahead to say that our “reading Scripture” journey does not end the same way it began. It starts with troubled souls but ends on a much happier note. Along the pathway we encountered a new (well, new for us) way of understanding Scripture. We discovered something called a “redemptive movement” approach to reading and applying the Bible. This was a much better way of thinking about how we should live out the Bible than what we had practiced before, and it has helped us come to terms with, and not simply overlook, some of the disturbing ethical components within the biblical portrait. We were able to make peace with what we had found so unsettling on the sacred page. Most importantly, a redemptive-movement approach to reading the Bible helped us to think more clearly about what God desired from us as parents.

In short, this book offers a case study within the corporal punishment texts about how Christians ought to interpret and apply Scripture. I will argue for reading Scripture with a redemptive-movement hermeneutic. Chapter two explains what is meant by a redemptive-movement hermeneutic and illustrates its usage in the slavery texts of the Bible. As you will come to see, a redemptive-movement hermeneu-



tic is not entirely new at all. It merely takes what we typically do in interpreting Scripture and enables us to do it a little better. A redemptive-movement hermeneutic fits as a subcomponent within a standard and well-accepted grammatical-historical approach, particularly in its emphasis on reading biblical texts within their ancient historical context. I will propose that by adding a redemptive-movement component to classic grammatical-historical hermeneutics, we significantly strengthen our grammatical-historical method. It does a far better job of the “historical” side of the grammatical-historical approach. Along strictly hermeneutical lines, then, the central question of the book could be posed this way: *Should Christians using a grammatical-historical hermeneutic add (or not add) a component of redemptive-movement meaning and application as they read the corporal punishment texts?*

So, here is our story—our stumbling, bumbling, parenting story—as at it relates to the *hermeneutics* of reading and applying Scripture. I hope that you will in some measure be able to travel with us on a biblical journey that reflects upon the rod, the whip and the heavy knife. But let us go back and start at the beginning of our hermeneutical pilgrimage with the opening chapter. Our journey began with first discovering some unsettling and downright disturbing components to the corporal punishment instructions within the Bible.