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DISCOVERING BIBLICAL EQUALITY

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A REDEMPTIVE-MOVEMENT HERMENEUTIC

The Slavery Analogy

William J. Webb

The biblical texts regarding slaves have much to teach the church about how to understand and apply certain texts regarding women. In this essay I hope to show, by the use of a redemptive-movement hermeneutic, that an abolition of patriarchy is consistent with the abolition of slavery and is in keeping with the redemptive movement that pervades all of Scripture.

A Redemptive-Movement Model

There are two ways of approaching the Bible: (1) with a *redemptive-movement* or *redemptive-spirit* appropriation of Scripture, which encourages movement beyond the original application of the text in the ancient world, or (2) with a more static or stationary appropriation. A static approach understands the words of the text in isolation from their ancient historical-cultural context and with minimal—or no—emphasis on their underlying spirit. This restricts contemporary application to how the words of the text were applied in their original setting. But to do so actually can lead to a *misappropriation* of the text, precisely because one has failed to apply the redemptive spirit of the text in a later cultural setting.

Figure 22.I and the accompanying example illustrate a redemptive-movement approach I call the $X \Rightarrow Y \Rightarrow Z$ principle.¹ Within the model, the *central position* (Y) represents particular words of the Bible at that stage of their development of a sub-

¹This model and definitions section has been condensed from William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

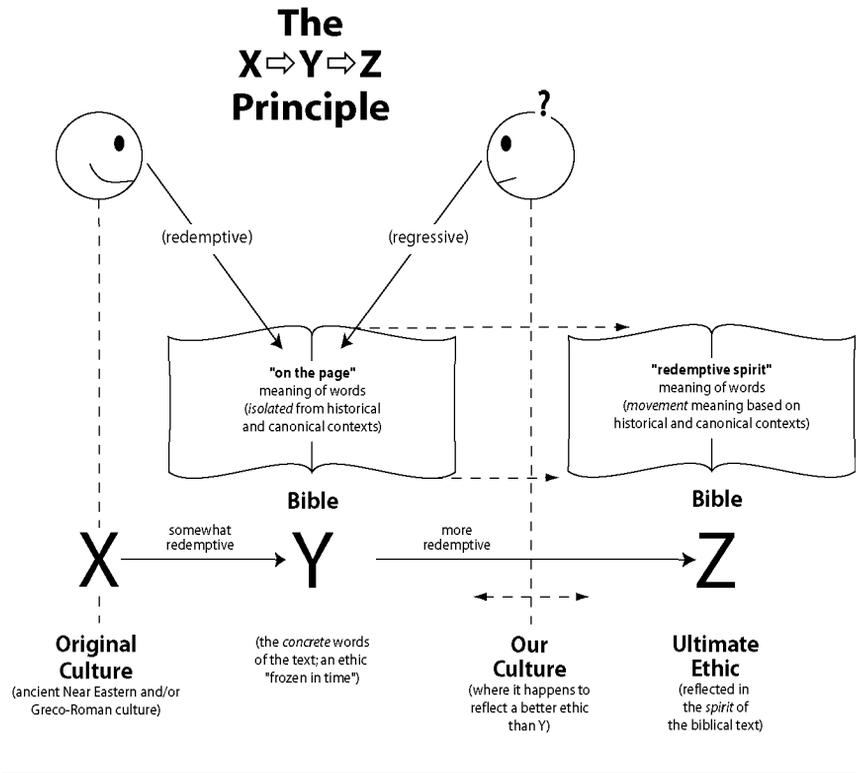


Figure 22.1. The X⇒Y⇒Z Principle

ject, if those words are understood in an isolated, “on the page” sense. On either side of the biblical text’s words, one must ask the question of perspective. First, how is the text to be understood from the perspective of the *original culture* (X)? And then, what does the text look like in our culture, when our culture happens to reflect a more redemptive social ethic—closer to an *ultimate ethic* (Z)—than the ethic revealed in the culturally particularized words of the biblical text? From the one direction the biblical text appears redemptive; from the other direction it appears regressive.

The X⇒Y⇒Z principle illustrates how aspects of the biblical texts were *not* written to establish a utopian society with complete justice and equity.² They were

²While the X⇒Y⇒Z diagram here differs from an earlier one (see Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, p. 32), the changes simply represent an attempt to express the same ideas in a clearer way.

written within a cultural framework with limited, incremental moves toward an ultimate ethic.

To illustrate: Deuteronomy 23:15-16 instructs Israel to provide safety and refuge to slaves fleeing harsh treatment in a foreign country. Such a slave was to be given shelter, was permitted to live in any of Israel's cities and was not to be handed over to his or her master. The redemptive dimension of this slavery legislation sparkles brightly in comparison to that of the surrounding nations. Most ancient Near Eastern countries had extradition treaties and administered severe punishment to runaway slaves, their families and those who aided in their escape.

A static hermeneutic would apply this slavery-refuge text by staying strictly with the words on the page, read in isolation from their "movement" meaning. Rather than being led by the spirit-movement meaning of this text to cry out for the abolition of slavery, the static reader would permit slavery in our culture (because the Bible did)—although she or he might seek to show kindness toward runaway slaves within the church or to give refuge to slaves in abusive relationships. Such an approach to applying the Bible would emphasize the words of the text in a highly isolated sense, while missing the spirit of the text.

What we should live out in our modern culture is not the isolated or "on the page" words of the text but the *redemptive spirit* that the text reflects when read against its original culture. In applying the Bible to our era, we do not want to remain static with the isolated words of the text (Y). Rather, we need to move beyond the frozen-in-time, concrete specifics of the text and take the redemptive dimension of those words to a further redemptive level—toward an ultimate ethic, Z.

The Need for a Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic

As various problematic components surface within the biblical texts on slaves and women, one strong impression emerges: a less-than-ultimate ethic in the treatment of slaves and women is reflected in various parts of Scripture. But rather than avoid these texts, we need to embrace them—even the difficult parts. After all, a good hermeneutic must be able to handle difficult texts as well as what we might deem to be easier.

Slavery texts: Falling short of an ultimate ethic. There exist a number of "not so pretty" components within the biblical slavery texts, where the treatment of slaves falls short of an ultimate ethic. We need to let the Bible's redemptive spirit

take us beyond the original application of these texts.³

1. *Attitude/perspective of ownership/property.* The Bible accepts the treatment of human beings as property (e.g., Ex 12:44; 21:20-21, 32; Lev 22:11).

2. *Release of Hebrew slaves versus foreign slaves.* Foreign slaves in Israel did not experience the same humane treatment as did Israelite slaves with the seventh year of release (Lev 25:44-46; cf. 25:39-43).

3. *Using slaves for reproductive purposes.* Some Israelites struggling with infertility used their slaves to produce offspring (Gen 16:1-4; 30:3-4, 9-10).

4. *Sexual violation of a slave versus a free woman.* An Israelite man who raped a betrothed Israelite woman was to be put to death (Deut 22:25-27), whereas sexual violation of a betrothed slave woman resulted in a mere payment/offering of damages (Lev 19:20-22).

5. *Physical beating of a slave.* A slave owner could beat his slave severely without any penalty, provided the slave survived the beating by a couple of days (Ex 21:20-22).

6. *Value of a slave's life versus a free person's life.* The Torah legislation values a slave's life less than a free person's life (Ex 21:28-32).

We should note that within ancient Near Eastern culture, many of these texts were slightly to moderately redemptive. Nevertheless, the above practices cannot be said to reflect an ultimate ethic. One solution might be to legislate in our contemporary setting a much more humane treatment of slaves as persons, attempting to clean up these liabilities by allowing the redemptive spirit already in the slavery texts as a whole to be taken further. However, that would surely be a makeshift solution. What is really needed is a reworking of the sociological structure itself.

Women texts: Falling short of an ultimate ethic. As with the slavery texts, we need honestly to acknowledge numerous "not so pretty" biblical texts that illustrate a less-than-ultimate ethic in the treatment of women.⁴ In these areas, better actions or dispositions toward human beings are both possible and desirable.

1. *Attitude/perspective of ownership/property.* Like slaves, women are often treated more as property than as people in the Old Testament. The wife is referred to as *be'ulath ba'al* ("a wife owned by her husband"; e.g., Deut 22:22), while her husband is sometimes referred to as her *ba'al* ("master") or *'adon* ("lord"; see Gen 18:12; Judg 19:26-27; Amos 4:1; 1 Pet 3:6).

2. *Less-than-adult, closer-to-a-child status.* Under biblical law, at marriage a woman

³For detailed bibliographic references for this and the next three biblical sketches, see *ibid.*, pp. 73-82, 162-78.

⁴See the discussion in chapter five of this volume.

transferred from being under her father's authority to being under her husband's authority. The husband had the right to overturn his wife's religious vows with no less prerogative and authority than a father had in overturning the vows of his daughter.⁵

3. *Inheritance/ownership of property.* Property was generally inherited by sons, not daughters. Even though a daughter without a brother could inherit family property (Num 27:5-8), she was required to marry within her clan, since at marriage her property was assumed to transfer to her husband (Num 36).

4. *Virginity expectations.* The Bible expresses considerable concern for the virginity of females (e.g., Gen 24:16; Num 31:35; Esther 2:2, 17-19; Ps 45:14-15; Lk 1:27). The male, however, is never applauded for virginity. Furthermore, proof of virginity is required for females but not for males (Deut 22:13-19; see also Ezek 23:42-45; Mt 1:18-19), and a lack of virginity resulted in the stoning of females (but not males; Deut 22:20-21; see also Lev 21:9, 13-15).

5. *Adultery and extramarital sex legislation.* The Torah included an elaborate ritual for the wife suspected of adultery (Num 5:11-31) but no reciprocal ordeal for the husband. In the case of infidelity a wife was always to be stoned, whereas a husband was stoned only if his infidelity involved another man's wife (Lev 20:10; cf. Deut 22:22, 23-24).

6. *Divorce legislation.* Old Testament legislation assumes the right of the male to initiate divorce (Deut 21:14; 22:19, 29; 24:1-4); two of these texts (Deut 21:14; 24:1-4) imply that the male could initiate divorce if he simply found something displeasing in his wife. The lack of gender equity in divorce settlements along with these broad-based grounds for divorce left women in an extremely vulnerable position.

7. *Other features of biblical patriarchy.* The biblical portrait of women in society included many other components that would seem to benefit from a greater infusion of redemptive spirit: polygamy (e.g., Gen 4:19-24; 25:1-4; 26:34; 29:14-30; 35:23-24; 36:1-4; 46:10; 2 Sam 5:13; 12:11; 1 Kings 11:1-4; 2 Chron 11:18-21) and concubinage (e.g., Gen 16:1-4; 35:25-26; 2 Sam 5:13; 1 Kings 11:1-4; 2 Chron 11:18-21), levirate marriages (Deut 25:5-10; see also Gen 38:8; Ruth 4:5; Mt 22:24-28), unequal value of men and women in vow redemption (Lev 27:1-8), the double impurity for female offspring (compared to male offspring; Lev 12:4; see also 12:6-7), the passing on of tradition primarily to sons (Deut 4:9-10; 6:2,

⁵Numbers 30:1-16; notice that sons are not even mentioned in the discussion of daughters.

7, 20; II:19, 21; 32:46), the treatment of women as trophies of war,⁶ the treatment of women as spoils of battle (e.g., Num 31:25-32; Deut 21:10-14; see also 20:14), the husband's implied authority to physically discipline his wife (e.g., Jer 13:20-27; Ezek 16:32-42; 23:22-30; Hos 2:1-3, 10), the uneven focus in the book of Proverbs on contentious women,⁷ the restriction of the old covenant sign of circumcision to males (Gen 17:14), along with the pejorative comparison of cowardly warriors with women (Is 19:16; Jer 50:37; 51:30; Nahum 3:13; cf. Judg 9:54).

To speak of this portrait of women as “sexist” would be anachronistic; indeed, relative to its culture the biblical treatment of women as a whole was redemptive. Yet it does not take a lot of imagination to figure out how one might improve on the treatment of women in these examples. As with the slavery texts, one solution might be to clean up some of these culture-based liabilities by permitting the redemptive spirit already within these texts as a whole to be taken much further, but still within the bounds of patriarchy. But again, such an approach seems to be only a makeshift solution. What is needed rather is a reworking of the sociological structure itself. At the very least, these texts point to the need for a redemptive-movement approach to applying the Bible.

To summarize several hermeneutical insights from this “not so pretty” section:

- A less-than-ultimate ethic in the treatment of slaves and women is a significant element in our Bible.
- We cannot assume that “just because something is in the Bible” it must reflect an ultimate ethic.
- A static or stationary (nonmovement) approach to Scripture does not resolve the problems presented in these “not so pretty” texts.

The Basis for a Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic

Fortunately, these “not so pretty” texts are not the whole story. There exists a much more redemptive side to the biblical treatment of slaves and women. It is this positive side that supports the legitimacy of a redemptive-movement hermeneutic, whose key principle is this: Movement is a crucial component of meaning within the biblical text. In fact, an examination of biblical texts reveals various kinds of redemptive movement—*foreign* movement (in relation to the ancient culture), *domes-*

⁶Joshua 15:16 (Acsah); cf. 1 Samuel 18:12-19 (Merab); 18:20-27 (Michal).

⁷Proverbs 21:9; cf. 19:13; 21:19; 25:24 (a twice repeated proverb).

tic movement (in relation to existing traditions or social norms within the immediate covenant community⁸) and *canonical* movement (across large epochs in salvation history, primarily from the Old Testament to the New). These three streams of “movement meaning” within Scripture provide the basis for contemporary application of the text that can carry us beyond bound-in-time assumptions about Scripture. As before, let’s begin with the slavery texts.

Slavery texts: Redemptive movement. Both Old and New Testaments make significant modifications to the institution of slavery relative to their broader cultures.

1. *Generous number of days off work.* Many ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultures gave slaves time off for festival holidays. By comparison, however, the extent of holidays for festivals (Deut 16:10-12) and for the weekly sabbath rest (Ex 23:12) in Israel was generous.

2. *Elevated status in worship setting.* Some ancient cultures restricted slaves from involvement in sacred rituals. The Roman Empire, for example, barred slaves from ceremonial aspects of its religious festivals because they were thought to have a defiling or polluting influence. On the other hand, the Israelite (Ex 12:44; Deut 12:12, 18) and early church communities included slaves in the worship setting. In the church their status was raised to equality “in Christ” (Gal 3:28; Col 3:22-25; 4:16).

3. *Release of Hebrew slaves after six years.* Biblical legislation (Lev 25:39-43; see also Jer 34:8-22) and the Code of Hammurabi are unique in prescribing the release of debt slaves after a certain number of years. This is a highly redemptive feature compared to most other ancient Near Eastern cultures.

4. *Provisions given to slaves upon release.* Material assistance for released slaves stands out as a generous act of biblical law (Deut 15:12-18); other law codes do not appear to include this act of compensation.

5. *Limitations on physical beatings; freedom for damaged slaves.* Biblical legislation limited the severity of physical beatings (Ex 21:20-21), and any slave who was damaged by her or his master automatically gained freedom (Ex 21:26-27). Other cultures did not limit the slave owner’s power in this way. Indeed, torturous abuse (including crucifixion) of some slaves was often intended as an object lesson for others.

6. *Admonitions of genuine care.* Paul encouraged masters to turn away from harshness

⁸Domestic movement has to do with change in tradition or social norms within a single generation (e.g., the daughters of Zelophehad), where the start and finish of that movement are markers in the same covenant community. This type of measure is different from foreign-relations benchmarks and from epoch-crossing (and often covenant-crossing) canonical movement.

and to show genuine care for their slaves.⁹ These words were powerful in a world that often left sick slaves to die without treatment.

7. *Condemnation of trading stolen slaves/people.* Scripture denounces foreign countries—Gaza and Tyre—for stealing people in order to trade them as slaves.¹⁰

8. *Refuge and safety for runaway slaves.* In the ancient world runaway slaves were sought for bounty. Captured slaves were at times executed along with their families and accomplices. The Code of Hammurabi prescribed the death penalty for aiding and abetting a runaway slave. Most nations had extradition treaties. In a radical departure from these prevalent views, Israel became a safety zone or refuge for foreign runaway slaves (Deut 23:15-16; cf. Is 16:3-4).

When these biblical modifications, which brought greater protection and dignity for the slave, are read in their ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman contexts, redemptive movement becomes increasingly clear. Admittedly, the biblical improvements did not liberate slaves into complete equality. Scripture moved the cultural “scrimmage markers” only so far. Yet the movement was sufficient to signal a clear direction for further improvements in later generations. This redemptive-movement meaning was—and is—absolutely crucial to contemporary application.

Women texts: Redemptive movement. As one compares the biblical texts about women to their surrounding context (and augments this foreign movement with domestic and canonical movement), a certain impression emerges. On the whole, the biblical material is headed toward an elevation of women in status and rights while reducing patriarchal power. An overall sense of redemptive spirit emerges from each of these examples.

1. *Improved rights for female slaves and concubines.* The ancient Near East permitted the sale of girls to any male, whether domestic or foreign, and often for sexual purposes. These young women had virtually no rights of their own. While the Old Testament permitted the sale of daughters as chattel slaves and concubines, it made a significant redemptive move against unchecked patriarchy by granting these female slaves rights normally afforded to the rest of Israel’s daughters (Ex 21:7-11).

2. *No bodily punishment of a wife.* Babylonian codes stipulated drowning for women who, in opposition to their husbands, neglected their home. Assyrian law permitted husbands to scourge their wives, pluck out their hair, and bruise or pierce their

⁹Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1; note especially Philemon 16, where Paul calls Philemon to treat Onesimus as “a beloved brother.”

¹⁰Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7; I Timothy 1:10 (NIV, “slave traders”); cf. Rev 18:13 (“human beings sold as slaves,” TNIV).

ears. For more rebellious acts of insubordination, the husband had the right to mutilate or cut off certain parts of his wife's body and in a few cases was even permitted to kill her. Old Testament legislation took husband-wife relationships in a quite different direction. To this may be added an aspect of canonical development. In Ephesians 5:25 not only is it assumed that the husband will do no bodily harm, but he is instructed to sacrifice himself—his own body and life—for the sake of his wife.

3. *Women gain inheritance rights.* The daughters of Zelophehad initiated the inheritance question (Num 27:1-11). They were permitted to inherit land, but under limited circumstances (Num 36:1-13). Even though this change was incremental, it indicates movement toward greater freedoms for women. This domestic movement is augmented with one Old Testament incident of complete inheritance equality, Job 42:15.

4. *The right of women to initiate divorce.* The New Testament extends the right of initiating divorce to women (Mk 10:12; I Cor 7:10-16). This kind of canonical movement sets a clear direction for the emerging status of women in Jesus and the early church.

5. *Grounds for divorce favor Judeo-Christian women.* In comparison with other ancient Near Eastern cultures, Israelite males had at least some minimal red tape to work through in divorcing their wives (Deut 22:13-19; 24:1-4). While not adequate by modern standards, within its own day this legislation granted Israelite women a greater dimension of dignity. Jesus takes this movement one step further by narrowing the broad Mosaic grounds for divorce (Mt 5:32; 19:9), which had reflected extreme patriarchal power. He thereby increased the rights and status of women and significantly reduced male authority.

6. *Fairer treatment of women suspected of adultery.* Biblical law instructed a husband who suspected his wife of adultery to take her to the temple and have her pronounce a curse upon herself (Num 5:11-31). Compared to the ancient Near Eastern environment, where the wife was often subjected to an abhorrent "trial by water" and guilt was determined by her sinking or floating (with potential for an anger-driven drowning), the biblical rule is redemptive. The fact that Israel had a less easily abused approach yields a sense of quiet reduction in patriarchal power within its cultural context. Furthermore, canonical development demonstrates that the "one gender only" response to adultery falls away. The early (and later) church discontinued Israel's practice of scrutinizing suspected adulteresses and moved toward greater gender equality in dealing with adultery (Mt 5:27-30; cf. Jn 7:53-8:11).

7. *Elevation of female sexuality.* Women often functioned as prostitutes in the ancient world, at a terrible cost to their dignity as human beings. Comparatively, the Bible elevates female sexuality (Lev 19:29). Though the redemptive movement in the area of female sexuality was incremental,¹¹ the covenant community took major steps against the sexual exploitation of women. Indeed, the apostle Paul elevated the marriage bed to a place of full equality (I Cor 7:3-4: the wife has authority over her husband's body equal to her husband's over hers). Within their setting and time, these developments were significant.

8. *Improved rape laws.* Assyrian rape laws punished the female victim whether she was forced or seduced and at times held her guilty while the man went free. An unmarried male perpetrator merely paid a monetary fine. If the perpetrator was a married male, his own wife was taken out by others and sexually ravished for his crime. While justice may have been achieved in the eyes of men, such practices often created a double atrocity for women. Old Testament rape laws have their own inherent difficulties, but they are much improved over the harsher patriarchy that marks certain law codes of the ancient world. And from a canonical perspective Jesus not only moves toward greater gender equality but also radicalizes the whole issue by addressing the lust of men (Mt 5:27-30; cf. Jn 7:53-8:11).

9. *Softening the husband side of household codes.* For the first-century Greco-Roman audience, the striking component of the New Testament household codes was the material concerning the husband. As with slavery, Paul modifies the top end of the hierarchical structure more heavily than the bottom. Paul's word to husbands to "love [their wives], just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her" (Eph 5:25) put their patriarchy on a different footing within the broader sociological setting.¹²

10. *Seed ideas and breakouts.* When read against the backdrop of the ancient culture, numerous biblical texts so dramatically advance the role and status of women that they might be labeled "seed ideas" and "breakouts": cases where God blesses women in roles that radically depart from the cultural norm of patriarchy (Judg 4:4-7; 5:1-31; cf. 2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron 34:22-28), mutuality statements that at least soften patriarchy in their immediate setting (I Cor 11:11-12), mutuality statements that go further and embrace full equality for processing marital de-

¹¹Cf. the earlier portrait of slaves (points 3 and 4) and women (points 4, 5 and 7).

¹²See chapter eleven in this volume for an elaboration of this point.

cisions (I Cor 7:3-5),¹³ and profound new/equal status statements for slaves and women (Gal 3:28; cf. I Cor 12:13; Eph 2:15; Col 3:11).

Bringing together the three streams of biblical movement—foreign, domestic and canonical—one can clearly see where Scripture is moving on the issue of patriarchal power and women's rights and status. In broad terms, there was a liberalizing, freeing and less-dominating spirit in both the slavery and the women texts. Yet if, as the previous section illustrates, the biblical movement toward an improved social ethic was incremental (not absolute) in the case of slaves and women, then redemptive movement clearly needs to be taken further. It must become a crucial factor in shaping our contemporary application of the women texts. Just as the slavery texts contain a crucial element of redemptive movement, so the redemptive spirit within the women's texts must carry us to new and improved ways of thinking about the treatment of women.

To summarize hermeneutical insights from the texts illustrating redemptive movement in the biblical treatment of slaves and women:

- A redemptive-movement hermeneutic acknowledges movement meaning—foreign, domestic and canonical—as a legitimate component of meaning in biblical words.
- Movement or redemptive-spirit meaning is crucial: it should shape the course of our contemporary appropriation of the Bible, carrying us beyond bound-in-time applications.
- As with the slavery texts, the redemptive spirit within the women texts must prompt us to wrestle with new and improved ways of treating women.

The Realization of Redemptive-Movement Meaning

The New Testament as final revelation. Before offering suggestions for contemporary application of a redemptive-movement hermeneutic, we need to raise the very important question of its limits. Given that the New Testament is the final apex of revelation, should we conclude that it offers a completely finalized expression of redemptive-movement meaning in all concrete particulars? Or does the redemptive movement begun in the Old Testament and extended in the New Testament need

¹³Paul's mutual obligation (I Cor 7:3), mutual deference (I Cor 7:4) and mutual consent (I Cor 7:5) statements call for equality in the decision-making process along with a radicalized sense of caring for the other person's needs.

to be extended even further? Does our commitment to the New Testament as God's final word help decide these questions one way or the other?

For Christians, of course, the New Testament *is* the "final and definitive revelation"¹⁴ by which we address all issues of faith and practice. Since the New Testament is God's final and definitive word spoken to his people in the last days (Heb 1:2), transmitted to the saints once and for all (Jude 3), we do not expect any further revelation until the coming of Jesus Christ.¹⁵ This point is not at issue.

Rather, here is the crux of the matter: How does one relate the New Testament as final *revelation* with a further *realization* of its social ethic? Some authors unfortunately merge these two concepts into one affirmation, assuming that the New Testament revelation contains a fully realized ethic in all of its concrete "frozen-in-time" particulars. All agree that the New Testament moves beyond the Old Testament in its development or realization of ethic; that is, it takes the Old Testament redemptive spirit further. However, the New Testament is still *like* the Old Testament in expressing the unfolding of an ethic at certain points in an incremental (not absolute) fashion. In the end, therefore, the issue is not the New Testament's status as final revelation but *the degree to which the New Testament is similar or dissimilar to the Old Testament with respect to its realization of ethic*. Do contemporary Christians in some fashion need to move *with* the redemptive spirit of the New Testament toward a realization of that movement beyond certain concrete, frozen-in-time particulars?

The rest of this chapter will present a threefold rationale for seeing the New Testament as expressing an incremental (not ultimate) ethic in certain concrete particulars: (1) the Old Testament as precedent, (2) the New Testament slavery texts and (3) the New Testament women texts.

The Old Testament as precedent: Continuity and discontinuity. An appeal to redemptive-movement meaning in the Old Testament should inform appropriate expectations for the New Testament. Granted, the New Testament moves the Old Testament ethic further along in its concrete expressions, as the Old Testament itself moved

¹⁴These words are used often by Thomas R. Schreiner in a critique of my book. What he perhaps does not know is that I am in full agreement with him on this point. See Thomas R. Schreiner, "William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*: A Review Article," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 (2002): 54-56, 63. For a more detailed discussion, see William J. Webb, "The Limits of a Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: A Focused Response to T. R. Schreiner," *EQ* 75, no. 4 (2003): 327-42.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 54.

incrementally beyond its foreign and domestic context. However, something very important has stayed the same between the Old and the New Testaments. The Old Testament was God's revelation to his covenant people within the constraints of a curse-laden and culturally shaped world, and the New Testament is *still* revelation from God within a curse-laden and culturally distinct world. Given that both of these factors—the fallen world context and an ancient world horizon—were still part of the equation at the time of the New Testament, one should be less quick to pronounce the movement within the New Testament “absolute” in all of its particulars rather than incremental like the Old Testament.

It is this “real world” continuity between Testaments that strongly suggests the likelihood of an incremental ethic within the New Testament and thus the need for a redemptive-movement hermeneutic.

The New Testament slavery texts: Further redemptive movement. Most agree that contemporary Christians need to have moved beyond the “frozen-in-time” words of the New Testament to a more ultimate ethic regarding slavery. Again, there is certainly movement within the New Testament slavery texts (beyond the Old Testament) toward a betterment of the institution. The status of slaves is basically elevated within the New Testament community, although household slaves with pagan masters are urged to follow Christ's example of suffering (I Pet 2:18-25). The fact that slaves had salvific equality “in Christ” surely had subtle ways of increasing their social status within the covenant community. Indeed, Paul's letter to Philemon urges the transformation of relationship between a runaway slave and his owner: slave and master are first of all brothers in Christ.

But none of this, as redemptive as it is, amounts to an abolitionist position in the New Testament. There is no overt call for the abolition of slavery. Slaves are still instructed to submit and obey. Christian masters are simply called on to treat their slaves in a humane and Christian way, as those who themselves serve a heavenly Master. Try as we may, modern Christians simply “cannot get there from here” with a stationary approach to meaning in the text. That is, we can scarcely argue cogently for a proactive abolitionist position in today's world based on a words-on-the-page understanding of the New Testament texts on slaves.

However, if we understand biblical meaning to include the *redemptive spirit* of the text, the situation changes. Now one can construct a well-reasoned argument that abolitionism best reflects a reasonable outgrowth of the spirit of the New Testament (*and that of the Old Testament!*) and its movement meaning. Wherever slavery may occur in our modern world, Christians should have an ethical

obligation based on the spirit of Scripture (a) to abolish slavery rather than simply (b) to treat slaves well but allow slavery. A static, words-on-the-page understanding of social ethics in the Bible leads to the second option (b); a redemptive spirit and movement understanding of social ethics in the Bible leads to the first option (a).

While the New Testament is our final and definitive revelation and its underlying redemptive spirit contains an absolute ethic, the *realization* of its redemptive movement is incremental (as in the Old Testament) and not a fully realized ethic. The abolition of slavery, a clearly better ethic than a call for a nicer form of slavery, can be achieved only through reading and applying Scripture with a redemptive-movement hermeneutic. Unless one embraces the redemptive spirit of Scripture, there is no biblically based rationale for championing an abolitionist perspective. An isolated-words or stationary approach to the New Testament simply will not take us there.

This is not a matter of simply “permitting” abolition as a social reform should it happen.¹⁶ That would involve a confusion of categories. Rather, since there truly is a better treatment of human beings than slavery, Christians should have a passionate commitment, rooted in the Bible’s redemptive spirit, to rid society of slavery.

The New Testament women texts: Further redemptive movement. In light of Old Testament precedent and a redemptive-movement hermeneutic applied to the New Testament as the only valid way to arrive at the abolition of slavery, we turn at last to the women texts themselves. As with the slavery texts, there is a need to embrace redemptive movement beyond certain concrete, frozen-in-time aspects of the New Testament texts on women. Here I offer a sample set of four New Testament women texts where there exists a good hermeneutical basis for taking the redemptive-movement spirit further in its realization. The first three examples are reasonably straightforward, and for the most part they have been conceded by virtue of church practice as nonprescriptive texts, at least on the level of their specific formulation of a woman’s obligations in the home and church. The final example requires a more extensive development, since it is the passage around which almost all the present controversy swirls. While more samples from New Testament texts

¹⁶Hierarchicalists sometimes say that it is OK to accept abolitionism because abolitionism itself is not condemned by the Bible! But here they fail to see the terribly anemic nature of their ethics, for it disregards the redemptive movement in Scripture and fails to find *any* ultimate ethic within the pages of the New Testament, our final revelation. Alternatively, a redemptive-movement hermeneutic argues that the slavery texts express an ultimate ethic in their underlying redemptive spirit.

about women could be provided,¹⁷ these four will suffice to make the point here.

Head coverings on women in worship. It is broadly conceded within the contemporary church that Paul's urging women to have some sort of head covering in worship (I Cor II) reflects a cultural component of life in Corinth.¹⁸ Most hierarchicalists willingly accept a movement away from the concrete, on-the-page specifics of the text here and accept some kind of attitudinal alternative. What they apparently do not realize is that such an applicational move extends the redemptive movement well beyond the New Testament setting. This application change, subtle though it may be, significantly reduces what is often perceived as an expression of patriarchy and encourages a less restrictive treatment of women. Such an applicational move is wonderfully consistent with the underlying spirit of the Bible.

Silenced women. The New Testament also instructs women to be silent and not to raise questions within congregational gatherings.¹⁹ Should they have any questions, they are to ask their husbands at home. In short, women are to be silent, and the text assumes a gender perspective: the male/husband is the repository of biblical knowledge.

The church has largely abandoned the concrete form of these instructions, and for good reason. Over the years women as a sociological group have greatly increased their knowledge and educational status. In our contemporary world, the questions raised by women often show more insight and knowledge than questions raised by men. So any kind of gender-based restrictions on questions in church becomes an application problem. Furthermore, when a woman gets home, she need not ask her husband for his insight on some passage or issue. She can simply consult a commentary, perhaps one written by biblical studies expert Margaret E. Thrall, whose exegesis of texts is as detailed and careful as those of her male counterparts in the field.²⁰ While providing certain transcultural underlying principles, this "be silent and ask your husband at home" text is generally no longer applied

¹⁷A case could easily be made for a realization of redemptive-movement meaning beyond the concrete particulars of other New Testament women texts (e.g., I Cor II:12; I Tim 2:14; 4:7). For I Corinthians II:12, see William J. Webb, "Balancing Paul's Original-Creation and Pro-Creation Arguments: I Corinthians II:11-12 in Light of Modern Embryology," *WIJ* 66, no. 2 (Fall 2004). For I Timothy 2:14, see Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, pp. 221-35, 263-68. For I Timothy 4:7, see Webb, "The Limits of a Redemptive-movement Hermeneutic," pp. 338-39.

¹⁸See the discussion in chapter eight in this volume.

¹⁹See the discussion in chapter nine in this volume.

²⁰See, e.g., her acclaimed commentary on 2 Corinthians: Margaret E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994, 2001).

today in its concrete gender-restrictive particulars.

Calling one's husband "master/lord." One New Testament text (I Pet 3:5-6) instructs Christian wives with pagan husbands to follow Sarah's example of submission, concluding that she "obeyed Abraham and called him her master [or lord]." Whether the Christian wife is being urged to call her pagan husband "lord" or whether Sarah's doing so to Abraham is simply illustrating her submission is a matter of debate.²¹ But at least the possibility of the former exists; and "lord" is the title slaves had to use with their masters.

In any case, contemporary hierarchicalists do not follow this New Testament "instruction" any more than egalitarians do. Knowingly or not, they have moved in their application to a far softer expression of patriarchy than what is found in the concrete configuration of the New Testament text. But this is a good thing, for it carries further the underlying spirit of both Testaments, bringing elevated status and treatment of women and a corresponding reduction in patriarchal power. Unwittingly the Christian community has applied movement meaning from the Old and New Testament women texts as a whole.

In some respects redemptive applications of the preceding three examples—head covering, silencing and calling one's husband "lord/master"—are a given in our world. Practice says as much about one's hermeneutic as does theory. However, the next example will push the theory discussion a little further. I will engage some hermeneutical tools of cultural/transcultural assessment. These tools augment a redemptive-movement hermeneutic, helping us spot certain features of the biblical text where redemptive movement can and should be taken further.

The submission of wives to husbands. In Paul's "household codes" he instructs women to "submit to" their husbands (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18). Some Christian interpreters water down the idea of submission in an attempt to make it more palatable today. It is sometimes difficult to tell if they are making a statement about the lexicography of ancient terms or about modern application. While recasting ancient lexical terms within a historical document is hardly honest, I would suggest that we do need to consciously change our contemporary application. We need to move with the Bible's redemptive spirit and go far beyond the first-century patriarchy evidenced by this "submit to" language.

Aside from the redemptive spirit within the biblical women texts, which is

²¹See the discussion by Peter Davids in chapter thirteen in this volume. It should be noted here that nowhere in the Old Testament itself does Sarah actually address Abraham as "lord." Very likely, as Davids points out, Peter is following a Jewish tradition that would have been known to his readers.

headed in a less restrictive direction, a decision to move beyond the patriarchy in this passage is informed by cultural/transcultural analysis. Two of the tools I will use might be called, respectively, “pragmatics between two cultures” and “the ladder of abstraction.” Leviticus 19:9, “You shall not reap to the very edges of your field,” offers a good neutral illustration of how pragmatic factors help us discover where the line is between cultural and transcultural components. It also shows how pragmatic factors generally affect the lower end of the ladder of abstraction. See figure 22.2.

Nonmoral pragmatic factors tend to shape the most concrete “on the page” expression or form of a biblical command. *Pragmatic factors* are often involved in the “down the ladder” components of a biblical command, whereas the *ultimate rationale* generally provides the basis for its “up the ladder” components. The pragmatic factors related to the original setting of the command of Leviticus 19:9 are at least twofold: the high percentage of the original Israelite population involved in farming and the close proximity between the population base and the farms.

These two pragmatic factors were part of the original setting, but they are *not* part of the agricultural and social configuration of our modern world. In our industrialized setting, the percentage of the population in cities is much greater, and farms are sometimes hundreds of miles removed from population centers. If modern farmers were to leave the corners of their fields unharvested, that grain would simply rot. Thus the pragmatic basis of the Leviticus text is lost in our setting. When we are moving between two cultures, a lack of sustained pragmatics serves as a clue to cultural components within the biblical text. When the bottom drops out of the pragmatic basis between two cultures, the Christian interpreter should be prepared to move up the ladder of abstraction to discover what is transcultural in a biblical command. Leviticus 19:9 provided a concrete way to express the biblical call “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now we return to the New Testament instructions for wives to “submit to” their husbands. There are several reasons these commands made sense in the original culture: differences in spouses’ ages (the female was often significantly younger), differences in amount of formal education, differences in opportunities to acquire and hold resources, lack of informational sources within the home, women’s lack of social exposure.²² These and other nonmoral pragmatic factors created an automatic and somewhat heavy hierarchy. Of course, these features of mar-

²²For a fuller discussion, see Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, pp. 213-16.

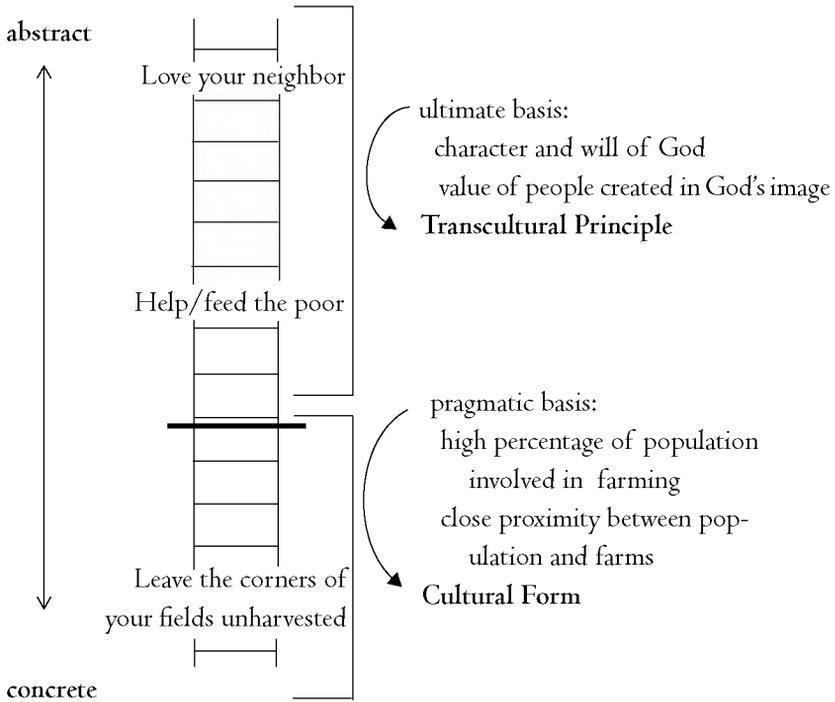


Figure 22.2. The ladder of abstraction

riage in the ancient world are not part of our contemporary world. Since the pragmatic situation no longer applies, we must be willing to move up the ladder of abstraction. When the “bottom falls out” of the pragmatics between two worlds, interpreters must be willing to rethink contemporary application.

So one must ask, what should a contemporary Christian marriage look like if we move to the top of the ladder of abstraction? An application of the transcultural principles of mutual submission, respect and self-giving love underlying Paul’s exhortations in Ephesians 5 should lead to a marriage in which husband and wife submit to one another, with deference in decision making based on expertise in a particular area rather than on gender.²³

²³In *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* I offer two models of marriage that meet this description, both of which utilize a redemptive-movement hermeneutic to avoid any gender-based hierarchy of authority. “Ultra-soft patriarchy” uses a redemptive-movement approach to apply a contemporary form of

Here is a summary of the hermeneutical insights derived from this crucial discussion of the realization of redemptive-movement meaning:

- We must make an important distinction between the New Testament as final *revelation* and the ethical *realization* of its redemptive spirit.
- There are three significant pieces of evidence that support an incremental (not absolute) ethic within the New Testament and thus commend a redemptive-movement hermeneutic within the New Testament. (1) Old Testament precedent within a cursed and culturally defined world should affect our social ethic expectations for the New Testament. (2) The New Testament slavery texts do not provide us with an ultimate social ethic in their concrete particulars, nor can one get to an abolitionist position based on a static “on the page” understanding of the words in these texts. (3) New Testament women texts show us—as seen in four brief examples—how we should permit the Bible’s redemptive spirit to carry us beyond certain culture-based components of the New Testament’s depiction and treatment of women.
- Christians need to ponder the Bible’s underlying spirit and its redemptive-movement meaning to make good contemporary applications of New Testament texts.

“greater male honor” through much milder expressions of ritual/social honor (e.g., the wife and children taking the husband’s last name) and not through gender-based leadership restrictions in the home or church. “Complementary egalitarianism” takes the redemptive movement in Scripture to complete male-female equality and so seeks out contemporary forms that express mutual deference and honor. There are no leadership role restrictions within the home or church in either model. In my view, whether one opts for ultra-soft patriarchy or an egalitarian position depends largely on one’s understanding of gender components within the creation texts. See Richard Hess’s examination of Genesis 1–3 in this volume (chapter four). For an alternative egalitarian approach to the creation narratives, see Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, pp. 110–51. While Hess’s approach and mine differ somewhat, we share the conviction that the creation account is best understood not to support male authority as a God-ordained, transcultural ideal.