

## A REDEMPTIVE-MOVEMENT HERMENEUTIC: ENCOURAGING DIALOGUE AMONG FOUR EVANGELICAL VIEWS

WILLIAM J. WEBB\*

The idea of a trajectory or a redemptive-movement approach to understanding and applying Scripture is hardly a new concept.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it would appear that the publication of *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (InterVarsity, 2001) has awakened interest in and debate on the subject along with strikingly divergent responses. Some evangelical scholars reject a redemptive-movement hermeneutic (herein, RM hermeneutic) as unnecessary and potentially harmful; others embrace a RM hermeneutic as a helpful and legitimate way of thinking through contemporary application of Scripture particularly on certain difficult issues in social ethics. This article will highlight four evangelical views along a spectrum of responses to a RM hermeneutic—two views on the rejection side and two views on the acceptance side.

My primary objective within this essay is not so much to make a fully developed case for a RM hermeneutic as it is to bring greater clarity to issues within the discussion. For the most part I will intentionally channel any extended supporting evidence into footnotes, so that interested readers can pursue the argument more completely within other publications. Accordingly, the broadest goal of this essay is to foster a greater understanding between views and, in turn, to encourage open and meaningful dialogue amongst evangelicals on this important subject.

In keeping with this broader goal of opening up discussion about trajectory hermeneutics I will proceed in three steps: (a) illustrate a RM hermeneutic within the slavery texts; (b) address certain misunderstandings and misconceptions; and (c) lay out four current evangelical responses to a RM hermeneutic. Within this third section I will briefly respond to these four views as well as surface the questions that readers need to wrestle with in an attempt to sort out their own position along this spectrum of responses.

### I. A REDEMPTIVE-MOVEMENT HERMENEUTIC: THE SLAVERY TEXTS

As one reads the biblical texts on slaves, an overwhelming impression emerges: *a less-than-ultimate ethic in the treatment of slaves/people is a major*

\* William Webb is professor of New Testament at Heritage Seminary, 175 Holiday Inn Drive, Cambridge, Ontario, Canada N3C 3T2.

<sup>1</sup> See discussion about “novelty” or “newness” under misunderstandings below.

*part of our Bible.* If we clear away the technical language, we might simply say that there is a problem with the treatment of slaves in the Bible. There exist numerous “not so pretty” components within the slavery texts that illustrate a less-than-ultimate ethic in the treatment of slaves/people:

- Human beings/slaves are considered to be property (Exod 12:44; 21:20–21, 32; Lev 22:11).
- Foreign slaves in Israel did not experience the seventh year of release (Lev 25:39–46).
- Slaves within Israel were used to produce offspring for their infertile owners (Gen 16:1–4; 30:3–4, 9–10; cf. Gen 35:22).
- Sexual violation of a betrothed slave woman did not lead to death as in the case of a free woman (Deut 22:25–27), but to a mere payment/offering for damages (Lev 19:20–22).
- A bull owner’s liability for their animal goring a slave to death (compared to a free person) shows tremendous inequality in terms of the value of human life (Exod 21:28–32).
- Slave owners were permitted to beat their slaves without any penalty, provided the slave survived and could get up after a couple of days (Exod 21:20–21).

To call the biblical treatment of slaves “abusive” in terms of the original culture would be anachronistic. Relative to the ancient culture many of these texts were in some measure progressive. Nevertheless, the above practices are problematic and in need of movement towards an ultimate ethic. A much more humane treatment of persons can be legislated and lived out in our modern civil-law settings. The idea of a RM hermeneutic is not that God himself has somehow “moved” in his thinking or that Scripture is in any way less than God’s word. Rather, it means that God in a pastoral sense accommodates himself to meeting people and society where they are in their existing social ethic and (from there) he gently moves them with incremental steps towards something better. Moving large, complex, and embedded social structures along on an ethical continuum is by no means a simple matter. Incremental movement within Scripture reveals a God who is willing to live with the tension between an absolute ethic in theory and the reality of guiding real people in practice towards such a goal.

Fortunately, there exists a “wonderful and inspiring” side to the biblical portrait of slaves. It is this positive side that establishes *redemptive movement as crucial meaning within the biblical text*. This movement meaning or redemptive-spirit meaning must profoundly shape the course of our contemporary appropriation of the Bible in a way that often carries us beyond the bound-in-time components of meaning within the biblical text. In the next set of examples the hermeneutical task is to “listen to” and “hear” the slavery texts within their cultural/historical context (relative to the ancient world) and their canonical context (with movement to the NT). In both cases, by hearing the biblical text in this manner, the reader begins to sense wonderful “movement meaning” as part of the biblical words about slavery:

- Holidays granted to slaves for festivals and for the weekly Sabbath rest, compared to the ancient world, were generous (Deut 16:10–12; Exod 23:12).
- In both Testaments slaves are included in the worship setting (Exod 12:44; Deut 12:12, 18; cf. Col 4:16; 3:22–25), and the NT church community profoundly raised a slave’s status yet further to equality “in Christ” (Gal 3:28). Some ancient cultures (such as the Roman Empire) restricted slaves from involvement in the sacred rituals and religious festivals because they were thought to have a defiling or polluting influence.
- No-interest loans within Israel were a preventative attempt to reduce the occurrence of debt slavery (Lev 25:35–36; Deut 15:1–2, 7–11); this compares with loan rates within the surrounding foreign nations that were often well in excess of 20% interest.
- The legislated release of Hebrew debt slaves after a certain number of years, when compared with most of the ancient world, is a highly redemptive aspect to biblical legislation (Lev 25:39–43; cf. Jer 34:8–22).
- Material assistance for released slaves stands out as a generous act of biblical law (Deut 15:12–18).
- Limitations were placed upon the severity of physical beatings (Exod 21:20–21), and freedom was granted to any slave who was physically damaged (Exod 21:26–27). Other ancient cultures did not limit the slave owner’s power in this way. In fact, torturous abuse of select slaves and intentional maiming/disfiguring often became an object lesson for others.
- Masters are admonished to turn away from harshness and to show genuine care for their slaves (Col 4:1; Eph 6:9), transforming the slave-master relationship with a new sense of Christian brotherhood (Phlm 16).
- Scripture denounces foreign countries (Gaza and Tyre) for stealing people in order to trade them as slaves (Exod 21:16; Deut 24:7; cf. 1 Tim 1:10).
- In the ancient world runaway slaves were sought for bounty. Captured slaves were often executed along with their families and/or accomplices. The code of Hammurabi prescribed the death penalty for aiding and abetting a runaway slave. Most nations held extradition treaties. In a radical departure from these prevalent views, Scripture outlawed any extradition so that Israel became a safety zone and refuge for foreign runaway slaves (Deut 23:15–16; cf. Isa 16:3–4).

When the Bible’s slavery texts are read against the ANE/Greco-Roman context, redemptive movement becomes increasingly clear. 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. Admittedly, it was not redemptive in any absolute sense. Scripture only moved the cultural “scrimmage markers” so far. Yet, that movement was

sufficient enough to signal a clear direction in terms of the possibility of further improvements for later generations. Redemptive-movement meaning was (and is) absolutely crucial to contemporary application. It is this movement meaning within the biblical texts—yes, even within the slave-beating texts—that should by logical extension of their underlying redemptive spirit take us to an abolitionist ethic. In so doing, an aspect of meaning from words within the slavery texts (not simply from without) becomes the basis for our contemporary convictions about the abolition of slavery.

In sum, a sense of the redemptive spirit or incremental development in ethic (“movement meaning”) within the slavery texts of the Bible is discovered through reading these texts relative to their ancient historical social setting. Such foreign movement is often augmented by further canonical movement between Testaments. This often-missed aspect of movement meaning is a crucial part of biblical authority for Christians wanting to apply the text today. Ultimately, a logical extension or trajectory of the redemptive-spirit meaning is what carries Christians in a credible fashion from the slavery texts to our contemporary affirmation of an abolitionist ethic.

For a development of a RM hermeneutic beyond this brief introduction, one can consult other publications that provide the ANE/GR slavery sources, visual diagrams of the method, and evidence of similar patterns of incremental movement in social ethic within the OT and NT women texts.<sup>2</sup>

## II. MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

A number of misunderstandings have arisen as evangelicals have interacted with a RM hermeneutic. In the following section I will attempt to correct some of these misconceptions about a RM hermeneutic (along with one non-Christian misunderstanding) with a brief response and generally a citation where further discussion can be found.

1. *A RM hermeneutic is a new concept.* Attempting to discredit the method, one evangelical scholar has declared that a RM hermeneutic is an “entirely new” approach.<sup>3</sup> Granted, the approach may be new to some individuals. However, the charge of novelty within conservative Christian hermeneutics simply betrays a misunderstanding of and/or insufficient interaction with our interpretive heritage. In a recent ETS paper Carl Sanders has documented that over three quarters of the criteria referencing the slavery texts in *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* have clear historical precedent

<sup>2</sup> William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 30–55, 73–81, 162–72; *idem*, “A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: The Slavery Analogy,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca M. Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 382–400.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, “Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*,” *JETS* 47 (2004) 299.

within the slavery debates of the past two centuries.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, based upon this historic evangelical usage of a RM hermeneutic, Sanders concludes that the charge of novelty is simply incorrect.<sup>5</sup>

2. *A RM hermeneutic replaces continuity-discontinuity approaches.* Another common misunderstanding is that a RM hermeneutic replaces classic evangelical continuity-discontinuity approaches (herein, CD approaches) for understanding the relationship between the Testaments. In short, the answer is “no” to any notion of replacing or displacing traditional CD approaches. Unfortunately, this replacement perspective reflects a significant misunderstanding of a RM hermeneutic—it is neither what I nor any other RM hermeneutic advocate, to my knowledge, holds. Rather, a RM hermeneutic augments or complements one’s existing CD hermeneutic.

Perhaps the best way to dispel this replacement notion is through engaging a practical venue. For instance, it would be easy for me to cite individuals who hold to a RM hermeneutic from evangelical seminaries across a wide spectrum of traditional CD approaches. From a select/illustrative sampling of evangelical professors, based upon feedback that I have received, a RM hermeneutic has significant support at dispensational, historic premillennial, or Reformed seminaries. Such evidence aptly demonstrates that a person’s particular continuity-discontinuity perspective is not at all displaced by or replaced by a RM hermeneutic. Scholars at these three strikingly different types of seminaries either choose to add (or not to add) a RM hermeneutic to their existing hermeneutical approaches.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the choice is as a supplement, not a replacement, of their existing CD hermeneutics.

To this practical answer one could further respond with certain theoretical considerations. First, CD approaches alone simply do not answer the sort of hermeneutical and ethical issues being addressed by a RM hermeneutic. For instance, Christians cannot simply appeal to OT/NT discontinuity in order to handle the problem of the slave-beating texts found within the OT.<sup>7</sup> If one ponders the question of first-century Christians beating slaves as it might well have emerged within the early church, it is almost inconceivable within such a slave-holding context that the early Christians would not have

<sup>4</sup> Carl Sanders, “The 19th Century Slave Debate: An Example of Proto-Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutics?” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, Texas, November 18, 2004). Dr. Sanders has kindly agreed to make his paper available upon e-mail request (csanders@bible.edu).

<sup>5</sup> Sanders’s historical research is particularly helpful since it is written from the vantage point of a hierarchical complementarian. While Sanders himself embraces a RM hermeneutic, he would not agree with me about “how far” to take the movement on the women’s issue. In other words, Sanders’s views concerning a RM hermeneutic fall within the third category (RMH Abolitionism, Recontextualized Hierarchy) discussed below.

<sup>6</sup> Thus the lack of a RM hermeneutic I have labeled functionally as a static or non-movement hermeneutic. The use of this “static” or “non-movement” label is not a straw-person approach since a RM hermeneutic is not an antithetical or mutually exclusive choice to using existing/traditional CD approaches. The choice is simply between the *use* or *non-use* of a movement/trajectory approach and not as a replacement alternative to CD approaches.

<sup>7</sup> Exod 21:20–21, 26–27.

given some weight to these OT texts. While canonical development exists between the Testaments on the slavery issue, the degree of discontinuity is not radical enough within the slavery texts (OT to NT) to unambiguously support even the abolition of slave beatings let alone the abolition of slavery. Let me qualify. Such abolitionist perspectives could not be well argued if no weight was given to movement meaning (foreign and canonical) within the slavery texts. Should one limit meaning within the slavery texts to only what is derived from the immediate literary context (up and down the page) and reject any movement meaning derived from reading these texts within their broader historical/social (ancient world) context, the case for abolishing beatings and ownership of humans becomes much more difficult to make. In short, trajectory and RM meaning supply a crucial factor in establishing an abolitionist perspective regardless of one's CD approach.

Second, slavery texts within the OT provide a precedent from Scripture itself for understanding hermeneutics and social ethics within the NT. Obviously Christians are not bound in a covenantal sense to the OT. Nevertheless, if an incremental ethic and redemptive movement can be shown as part of God's revelation to his covenant people within the OT, then it raises the likelihood of such a phenomenon within the NT.<sup>8</sup> While CD approaches resolve some questions regarding the relationship of the OT to contemporary Christians, they should not disqualify or discredit the contribution of the OT to questions of hermeneutical process especially where the degree of continuity between Testaments is fairly strong. Thus a RM hermeneutic functions as an augment to, not a replacement or displacement of, CD hermeneutics.

3. *A RM hermeneutic seeks to establish a "better ethic" than that of the NT.* Some evangelical scholars have misunderstood and, in turn, misrepresented a trajectory hermeneutic by suggesting that proponents of a RM hermeneutic want to establish a "better ethic" than the ethic of the NT.<sup>9</sup> This would amount to establishing an ethic that is not really the ethic of the NT at all, but one that is indeed foreign to the NT ethic. There is no question that the language I use about "going beyond" can be (wrongly) construed in such a direction. Thankfully, most readers of *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* observe that I repeatedly qualify such language to talk about a going beyond an "isolated words"<sup>10</sup> *understanding* of the Bible. With this important qualification in place there is no dislocation between any reference to a "better ethic" and the true ethic of the NT. They are one and the same. In other words, the "better ethic" developed through a RM hermeneutic is in fact the ethic of the NT (and OT) rightly understood and rightly applied.

<sup>8</sup> For a development of the "OT as precedent" argument see William J. Webb, "The Limits of a Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: A Focused Response to T. R. Schreiner," *EQ* 75 (2003) 327-42.

<sup>9</sup> Grudem, "Should We Move Beyond" 299-346.

<sup>10</sup> By "isolated" I mean an understanding of the words on the page that is isolated from the "movement meaning" derived from reading the text within its ancient social context.

4. *A RM hermeneutic undermines the authority of the Bible/NT.* Closely related to the last misconception is the charge that a RM hermeneutic undermines the moral authority of the NT/Bible. The basis for this “undermining biblical authority” charge is that supposedly a RM hermeneutic no longer ties moral authority to “what the Bible says” or “what the NT teaches.”<sup>11</sup> If a RM hermeneutic actually did this (divorced moral authority from “what the Bible says/teaches”), then I would be the first to agree with my critics that his charge has substance. However, the basis for the charge is built upon a faulty understanding of a RM approach. Advocates of a RM hermeneutic are very clear in affirming that “redemptive movement” is an element of meaning within the actual words of the biblical text. The redemptive spirit derived from reading texts within their social/historical context *is* a very important part of what the Bible says and teaches (but what Christians unfortunately often miss). Since I have posted a lengthy response to this misunderstanding, available on the ETS website,<sup>12</sup> I will simply curtail my comments here to this summary response.

5. *A RM hermeneutic does not view the NT as final and definitive revelation.* Some evangelicals have voiced a concern that a RM hermeneutic fails to understand the NT as final and definitive revelation.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately this “final revelation” concern introduces yet another misconception about a RM hermeneutic. Proponents of a RM hermeneutic readily agree that the NT is unquestionably God’s final and definitive revelation. This is not really at issue. Rather, the real issue is what inferences might be drawn, rightly or wrongly, from such an affirmation about the NT as final and definitive revelation. I would argue against equating final revelation with the final realization of social ethic as portrayed in every detailed and concrete component of NT texts. One might capture the distinction this way: understanding the NT as final and definitive *revelation* does not automatically mean that the NT contains the final *realization* of social ethic in all of its concrete particulars. Since I have responded in a full-length *EQ* article with three supporting arguments (OT as precedent, NT slavery texts, and NT women texts) to make this case, I will simply cite that argumentation here.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Grudem, “Should We Move Beyond” 306, 346.

<sup>12</sup> See William J. Webb, “A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: Responding to Wayne Grudem’s Concerns” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, November 18, 2004). To obtain an e-copy through Zondervan check the *Wednesday afternoon (PM)* ETS schedule for Webb’s paper (<http://www.etsjets.org/meetings/2004/papers/2004-papers-idx.html>) and send an e-mail request for the paper.

<sup>13</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner, “William J. Webb’s *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*: A Review Article,” *SBJT* 6/1 (2002) 46–64; *idem*, “Review of *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 7/1 (2002) 41–71. Schreiner makes this affirmation about the NT as the “final and definitive revelation” numerous times in his critique of my work. See Schreiner, “A Review Article” 54, 55, 56, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Webb, “Limits of a Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic.” As the dialogue continues here in this present article, I sincerely hope that the proponent of this “final and definitive revelation” criticism, Thomas Schreiner, would come to realize that his own hermeneutical position (see

6. *A RM hermeneutic seeks to replace a grammatical-historical hermeneutic.* Pastors and laypersons will often ask, why do we need a redemptive-movement hermeneutic? Was not our “standard” grammatical-historical hermeneutic good enough? The short answer here is that a RM hermeneutic is actually a subcomponent (not replacement of) a *good* grammatical-historical hermeneutic. As evangelicals we have often paid lip service to the “historical” within a grammatical-historical hermeneutic. But, the reality is that most of our energies have been focused on discovering meaning through grammatical and lexical routes. The renewed emphasis on a RM hermeneutic is in part attributable to the greater availability of historic documents, which provide us with a much better understanding of the broader ancient social context within which to understand Scripture. In fact, the historical interests of a RM hermeneutic—reading an ancient document within its broader historical and ancient social setting to sense “movement meaning” and the underlying spirit of a text—reflects what ought to be standard practice in the grammatical-historical investigation of meaning within any historical document (see next point).

7. *A RM hermeneutic is a Christian-enclave hermeneutic limited to understanding the Bible.* Some individuals (particularly those of a non-Christian persuasion) view a RM hermeneutic as a concocted attempt on the part of Christians to get the Bible to say what they want it to say, namely “nicer things” than those found in the text. These sometimes antagonistic opponents want to read the words of Scripture *only* in an isolated sense (up and down the page) without any ancient-world movement meaning so that they can anachronistically “trash” a biblical ethic as seen within the slavery or women texts. In response to these Bible-bashing enthusiasts, whether in exchanges on university campuses or on my street with certain well-educated neighbors, I have sometimes found it helpful to show the validity of a RM hermeneutic<sup>15</sup> through its use as a standard assessment of meaning within any ancient document, biblical or otherwise. This broader discussion of hermeneutics within cherished non-biblical historical documents may well provide insights for our intramural evangelical debate. Such discussion certainly addresses the above question about a RM hermeneutic as a subcomponent of a grammatical-historical hermeneutic.

Perhaps the best way for Christians and non-Christians alike to see a RM hermeneutic in operation within non-biblical literature is to look at how we ought to interpret (and apply) certain well-known historical documents and

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view #2 below) develops a greater realization of ethic beyond the concrete specificity of certain components within NT texts. In the end, Schreiner’s “NT as final and definitive revelation” criticism and its underlying assumptions about a final realization of social ethic in the NT does not truly square with his own methodology in moving from the slavery texts of the NT to an abolitionist ethic.

<sup>15</sup> Obviously the technical language about a “RM hermeneutic” would not emerge in neighborhood discussions.

historical figures that are part of our journey-to-abolitionism heritage.<sup>16</sup> For instance, if we examine past legislative documents about slavery, one discovers that “movement meaning” is crucial to understanding those documents especially if one were to ask the question, “What would the framers of these documents do and say today?” In a sense a movement-as-meaning hermeneutic is an interpretive method focused upon applying ancient documents today. Movement meaning often tells us much more about true heart-and-soul meaning of the authors than the actual frozen-in-time concrete specificity of the social ethic contained within these documents.

For instance, one might recall the classic “three fifths” of a person statement about slaves in the Articles of Confederation (1787). Yes of course, those words indicate that (black) slaves within the United States counted as three-fifths of full human status with respect to census representation and taxation matters. One could mechanically exegete this text and say that black slaves counted as 0.6 or 60 percent of a free white person in these two politically charged areas. This would be correct in a limited sense as a frozen or moment-in-time reality. Much more important to social-ethic meaning within the three-fifths statement, however, is the “movement meaning” between zero and three fifths or between three fifths and one whole, which captures the underlying spirit of this text—the respective passions and ideologies of the north and the south.

Similarly, one might remember the American legislative statements about the yearly quota for importing stolen or kidnapped slaves from Africa and from other foreign countries. It is not the concrete specificity of any given year but the movement meaning—the *incremental* reduction in quota within the complex pressures of economic realities—that provides us with the actual heartbeat of the framers. Here movement meaning within the import/export documents, often derived from broader historical and social context, conveys the true social ethic of the framers; this time the incremental movement reflected a shared ideology for the north and south in an attempt at least to eliminate a certain type of slavery.<sup>17</sup> As yet another example, movement meaning in the lives of great historical figures such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln on the slavery issue (incremental

<sup>16</sup> For a slightly expanded discussion see William J. Webb, “Questions and Answers,” pp. 12–13 [cited 7 March 2005] on the “Let’s Talk Theology” website: <http://www.fellowship.ca/theology/>. The interpretation of historical documents and figures in the American slavery scene is an explosive topic on American university campuses today. As an example of one who propounds a RM hermeneutic (i.e. movement-as-meaning approach) for understanding American history, see David Horowitz, *Uncivil Wars: The Controversy of Reparations for Slavery* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002) 5, 105–37. I am not suggesting broad-sweeping approval of Horowitz’s conclusions about reparations (I differ at certain points). Nevertheless, I think that Horowitz’s understanding of underlying spirit and movement meaning both for historical documents and for historical figures provides a credible way of interpreting the past when trying to sort out relevance for the present.

<sup>17</sup> The Bible’s social ethic in its concrete specificity or “frozen in time” aspect of meaning (quite aside from its underlying redemptive spirit) forced the non-abolitionists to accept the ultimate elimination of dependency upon a stolen-persons slave trade. In this sense, one might speak of an “already” (concrete specificity) achieved element and a “not yet” (underlying redemptive spirit) fully achieved element of meaning within the Bible’s social ethic.

movement relative to the broader historical context and movement across the whole of their lives) provides a more accurate and less anachronistically skewed sense of who they truly were as persons and “what they as historical leaders would do and say in today’s context.”<sup>18</sup>

In sum, the *underlying spirit* or *incremental movement* component of meaning within the three-fifths wording of the Articles of Confederation (1787), within the statements about the equality of all human beings in the Declaration of Independence (the social implications of which had yet to be fully realized), and within other (incremental though not absolute) acts like the legislation against importing more stolen slaves, is of utmost importance. The convergence of these various strands of underlying spirit or movement meaning find their ultimate fulfillment within the abolitionist conclusions of a later day.

### III. FOUR VIEWS ON A REDEMPTIVE-MOVEMENT HERMENEUTIC

At least four views have emerged amongst evangelical scholars as they have sought to interact with a RM hermeneutic. Depending upon how one hermeneutically engages the *slavery* texts and the *women* texts of the Bible, the following four views reflect the diversity of evangelical thinking in this area: (1) Explicit Abolitionism, Concrete Hierarchy; (2) Principled Abolitionism, Concrete Hierarchy; (3) RMH Abolitionism, Recontextualized Hierarchy; and (4) RMH Abolitionism, Egalitarianism. The first two views reject a RM hermeneutic; the latter two embrace a RM hermeneutic as a helpful approach for the slavery and women texts yet differ on “how far” to take the trajectory within the women texts. Also, an important distinction exists between the first two views and the third view in terms of willingness to rethink “form issues” in the contemporary application of hierarchy (beyond the concrete specificity of the biblical text) given implications from a RM hermeneutic along with other contextualization considerations.

In sorting through one’s own perspective within the fourfold spectrum, readers must consider how the previous section about “misunderstandings and misconceptions” contributes to that decision. To this point in the debate, the misunderstandings in the previous section have played a major role in why the proponents of the first two views (below) reject a RM hermeneutic. Addressing these misunderstandings and correcting faulty thinking about a

<sup>18</sup> In a similar manner, *historical figures* should be studied and understood with an underlying spirit or movement component of meaning. The lives of great historical people such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln are what might be described as “flawed compromises” with respect to slavery. They were not abolitionists in the purist sense (any more than the Bible is in its isolated words). But their lives reflected a clear direction of movement towards “a better life for slaves” when seen over a spread of several years (from beginning to the end of their lives) and especially when viewed within the emerging struggles of a particular social context. Their *spirit/movement* suggests they were the proto-abolitionists or the subtle antislavery proponents of their day. To put it another way, the *spirit* of these people (not their isolated, concrete-specific acts or words) provides an earlier “up river” tributary that flows with and into the larger/growing abolitionist *spirit* of a later day.

RM hermeneutic will hopefully in some measure enable the dialogue to progress. In a discussion as complex as the one at hand I suspect this disentanglement process will take some time. Nevertheless, if it is possible that “movement meaning” provides a legitimate component of implicit meaning within the biblical text,<sup>19</sup> if Christians perhaps have missed such meaning at times in the past and can easily miss it today,<sup>20</sup> and if RM meaning should potentially play some role (how much?) in determining contemporary issues about how we apply the biblical text today, then the importance of such inquiry certainly calls for evangelical reflection and dialogue.

1. *Explicit Abolitionism, Concrete Hierarchy (Grudem)*. The first view, represented by Wayne Grudem,<sup>21</sup> rejects a RM hermeneutic and instead develops a method that might be described as “explicit abolitionism” within the slavery texts and “concrete hierarchy” within the women texts.

What I mean by “explicit abolitionism” is that Grudem understands the NT, and Paul specifically, to be *explicitly* teaching the abolition of slavery within the isolated words of the text as understood in their literary (up and down the page) context.<sup>22</sup> According to Grudem, Christians do not need to derive any underlying or *implicit* “movement meaning” from reading biblical words within the broader context of the ancient social/historical setting (i.e. discovering a sense of underlying redemptive spirit) in order to work through contemporary issues in social ethics. All meaning is readily available to us at a surface level as we read the “isolated words”<sup>23</sup> directly off the page of the biblical text. Since Grudem understands Paul to be clearly teaching abolitionism in a direct and explicit manner within 1 Cor 7:21b, Phlm 16a, 17–19, 21, and 1 Tim 1:10, he therefore argues that we have no need for a RM hermeneutic. In a response to Grudem I have already briefly argued,<sup>24</sup> and will yet present a more developed case,<sup>25</sup> that the Pauline slavery texts upon which he bases his exegetical conclusions do not really mean anything close to what he is taking them to mean. No, they do *not* teach abolitionism in any explicit manner. They explicitly teach a better treatment of slaves (yes) but not the abolition of the institution of slavery. While an explicit abolitionist referent

<sup>19</sup> This component of meaning is part of the larger social/historical framework and so is *implicit* (underlying) within the words and not *explicit* (surface level).

<sup>20</sup> Obviously in grammatical-historical hermeneutics the easiest and most readily available context is the immediate literary context—reading a text in terms of what is found up and down the page. The larger social and historical context, though just as important to meaning, requires more work to obtain. Nevertheless, the effort is worth it. After all, it is that historical/social context that permits readers of the Bible (and of any ancient literature where questions of contemporary relevance are being asked) to capture a sense of the underlying *spirit* of the text along with the concrete specificity on the page.

<sup>21</sup> Grudem, “Should We Move Beyond” 299–346.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 302, 313–14.

<sup>23</sup> By “isolated” words I mean words without any movement meaning derived from the broader context of the ancient social/historical world.

<sup>24</sup> Webb, “A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: Responding to Wayne Grudem’s Concerns,” Appendix B.

<sup>25</sup> See my forthcoming ETS paper (November 2005) entitled, “From Slavery Texts to an Abolitionist Ethic: The Non-Trajectory Approaches of Wayne Grudem and Thomas Schreiner.”

is a *possible* way of reading these texts in an isolated manner (immediate literary context only), a reasoned probability exegesis that weighs competing alternatives makes Grudem's reading a *highly improbable* interpretive option.

Seeing no need for a RM hermeneutic within the slavery texts, Grudem is certainly not inclined to using such methodology within the women texts. His non-movement approach within the women texts might be described as an affirmation of "concrete hierarchy." By this descriptive label I mean his affirmation of the continued and transcultural application of hierarchy as it is depicted within the concrete, specific wording of the NT text. In other words, Grudem shows little willingness to rethink even the *degree* of hierarchy or to reflect upon how the wonderful movement meaning within the women texts that carried the biblical treatment of women to greater dignity within the ancient day (along with other between-two-worlds contextualization factors) might provide a basis for Christians' contemporary reflection about an even greater development of dignity through rethought or alternative forms and expressions of hierarchy within our day. Other than a limited transposition at the very *physical* level of external symbols (head coverings for marriage rings today) Grudem's approach to Scripture stays very close to its concrete and language-specific expression of hierarchy within the biblical text. This transposition of physical symbols provides something of the outer limits for how Grudem's method of application goes beyond the actual wording of the biblical text.<sup>26</sup>

2. *Principled Abolitionism, Concrete Hierarchy (Schreiner)*. The second view, represented by Thomas Schreiner,<sup>27</sup> likewise rejects a RM hermeneutic and in its place develops an approach that might be described as "principled abolitionism" within the slavery texts while affirming a position of "concrete hierarchy" within the women texts.

On the subject of slavery Schreiner appeals to the broader principles of the NT (e.g. the love command, etc.) in order to build a positive case for the abolition of slavery.<sup>28</sup> Schreiner would argue against Grudem's understanding that the NT authors clearly teach abolitionism within their words addressing slavery. If the NT does not teach abolitionism in a direct manner, then how does Schreiner arrive at such a social ethic position? Schreiner's journey to abolitionism can be depicted as "principled abolitionism" because, while he

<sup>26</sup> I do not disagree with the "physical symbol transposition" method *per se*, only with limiting a hermeneutics of application to such methodology.

<sup>27</sup> Schreiner, "A Review Article" 46–64. Aside from this review article, my understanding of Schreiner's position is derived from his contribution within James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg, eds., *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 177–235, and from personal correspondence about an abolitionist/slavery hermeneutic.

<sup>28</sup> Grudem likewise appeals to higher/abstract principles within the NT as an argument for abolitionism (see Grudem, "Should We Move Beyond" 313–14). However, for Grudem such an "abstract principles" basis—love your neighbor, image of God, etc.—is not at all crucial to his hermeneutical approach and social ethic conclusions because he can (and does) argue that in fact abolitionism is precisely what Paul taught in a direct fashion within his slavery passages.

includes several other factors within this approach,<sup>29</sup> in the final analysis it is the component of higher principles within Scripture that provides sufficient reflective assessment of the biblical text and the impetus to rise above and go beyond the concrete wording of the slavery texts.

I applaud Schreiner for his courage within the slavery texts to go beyond the concrete specificity of the biblical text. Like Schreiner, I too would appeal to the larger principles of Scripture (love command, image of God, etc.) in moving from the non-abolitionist or not-yet abolitionist<sup>30</sup> practice revealed within the NT slavery passages to an abolitionist ethic in contemporary practice. Nevertheless, his reliance upon the broader/higher principles (love command) for positive ethical inertia would be greatly enhanced through adopting a RM hermeneutic alongside of a principled approach. First, there is nothing that makes a RM approach logically incompatible with a larger values-and-principles approach for moving beyond the concrete particulars of the Bible in a biblical manner. Second, there is conversely much that favors a unified approach between the two methods. For instance, if incremental “movement meaning” towards a better social ethic within the ancient world is part of the meaning of the OT and NT slavery texts *themselves*, then such meaning within these texts connects well with the positive drive and momentum within a values-and-principles approach to advance towards an abolitionist perspective.<sup>31</sup> One might further add that canonical movement meaning within the slavery texts *themselves* (also part of a RM hermeneutic) and its quiet but powerful contribution to the stream of redemptive spirit within Scripture finds positive fulfillment in an abolitionist ethic. In other words, a RM hermeneutic has the added value of rooting the greater fulfillment and realization of redemptive spirit found within the slavery texts *themselves* (in addition to

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Schreiner would include within his approach to abolitionism the following four factors: (a) slavery is part of a fallen-world (non-Edenic) structure; (b) there are indications that slavery is not an ideal in the NT; (c) the intention of the NT is not to baptize or normalize the social structure of its day; (d) the broader principles of Scripture (e.g. the love command, etc.) provides a sufficient Christian values base and social-ethic criterion upon which to build a case for the abolitionism of slavery. The reason I highlight the fourth plank within Schreiner’s abolitionist methodology is because it is the only component that gives sufficient “lift” and “power” within his system to move to an abolitionist ethic. In a sense the first three components (a–c) provide a framework within which to grant permission to do reflective-thinking analysis about various levels of social ethic within the biblical text and thus apply the “higher principles” as a reflective lens (d) through which to read the text. While the first three points (a–c) open the door for “moving beyond” methodology, it is the final point (d) that creates the inertia to actually cross that threshold. From my own vantage point, all four of Schreiner’s factors (a–d) function very nicely in conjunction with (not in exclusion from) a RM hermeneutic.

<sup>30</sup> By “non-abolitionist” I mean *not* an abolitionist ethic in any fully realized sense (i.e. the finalized outworking of Scripture’s underlying redemptive spirit in concrete articulation) and *not* an abolitionist ethic in terms of direct referential meaning as its words are read only within the immediate literary contexts, namely, up and down the page. Perhaps a better way of describing the NT slavery ethic than “non-abolitionist” would be to call it “not fully realized abolitionism” or “not yet abolitionism” or “proto-abolitionism” or “emerging abolitionism.”

<sup>31</sup> An investigation of the slavery texts (see footnote 29 above) does not simply grant permission to do reflective faith-based thinking about what is “more loving” in view of their *negative* fallen-world components. Rather, it is the *positive* redemptive spirit and movement meaning within these texts that converge with an ultimate love ethic. Thus the best method is a combination of methods.

the rationale expressed in Schreiner's values-and-principles approach) and not simply positive momentum meaning derived external to or outside of these slavery texts.<sup>32</sup>

If one carries over Schreiner's broader values-and-principles method from the slavery texts into the women texts, it logically opens up the possibility for some form of reflective thinking about moving beyond the concrete specificity of the women texts. For example, one might ask if the broader marriage principle of "sacrificial love" might not prompt a husband within our contemporary setting to lovingly and sacrificially give to his wife an even greater proportion of "the balance of power" within the relationship than would have been culturally appropriate or even possible in the first century. This would not abdicate his leadership role but simply increase her leadership contribution and strengthen her input within some sort of shared decision-making relationship. Given the higher principles methodology of going beyond the slavery texts to an abolitionist ethic, Schreiner is keenly aware that his approach in the slave texts creates a "theoretical possibility" of doing the same within the women texts, and he rightly admits to such.<sup>33</sup> However, Schreiner would be reticent to applying the same methodology in the case of the women texts because of the connection between the garden/Eden and hierarchy.<sup>34</sup>

Setting aside prolonged discussions about Eden and hierarchy,<sup>35</sup> let us assume for sake of argument that Schreiner's ties-to-Eden perspective is correct. In response to Schreiner, it should be noted that an Eden-link objection to using his own "going beyond" methodology (i.e. principled abolitionism) within the women texts or to using a RM hermeneutic coupled with between-two-world considerations within the women texts is extremely weak. One has to assume the highly unlikely idea that the Eden *principle* of hierarchy or greater honor is never impacted or influenced in its *application* and concrete expression within later Scripture by factors of either (a) the fallen world and/or (b) a culturally distinct world.<sup>36</sup> Yet, these two crucial consid-

<sup>32</sup> While other factors in Schreiner's approach to slavery (see footnote 29 above) develop a negative component to the social ethic of the slavery texts within Scripture (thus permitting a "going beyond" methodology), they do not provide the positive inertia for such "going beyond" within the slavery texts themselves. This is one reason why the slavery debates dragged on for as long as they did. Many Christians were content to live "where the Bible stopped" in its redemptive movement towards a better sort of slavery but not the total abolition of slavery. Only when one latches onto the positive inertia or redemptive spirit within the slavery texts, does one discover a *substantive positive link* in meaning between the slavery texts and an abolition-of-slavery ethic.

<sup>33</sup> Private e-mail correspondence.

<sup>34</sup> This particular Eden-link objection is derived through correlating methodological statements from (a) a recent e-mail exchange on Schreiner's abolitionist/slavery hermeneutics; and (b) two published sources focusing more on the gender issue. See sources above.

<sup>35</sup> Egalitarians handle the question about hierarchy in the garden as either (a) wrongly interpreted as being present within the garden or (b) possibly present in a quiet sense of "greater honor" but not necessarily intended as a transcultural component for all applicational settings today.

<sup>36</sup> These two parameters ought to provide for hierarchical complementarians a similar sort of permissions base for applying a reflective-thinking "going beyond" approach to the concrete specificity within the women texts that is similar to what is/was required for Schreiner in the slavery texts. Compare footnote 29 above.

erations make reflective thinking about how to reconfigure hierarchy in our present setting beyond the concrete expression in the text a good and worthwhile endeavor. Even for hierarchical complementarians these two factors—a fallen world and a culturally distinct world—should and do (for many) legitimize the combined use of Schreiner’s principled-abolitionism method, a RM hermeneutic, and other between-two-worlds contextualization considerations within the women texts. We now turn to a third position that emerges along these lines of rethinking at least the concrete specificity and “down the ladder” (of abstraction)<sup>37</sup> articulation of hierarchy within the NT.

3. *RMH Abolitionism, Recontextualized Hierarchy (Blomberg, Bock, Strauss)*. A third emerging view, represented by Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, and Mark Strauss,<sup>38</sup> embraces a RM hermeneutic as a helpful approach for the slavery and women texts yet differs with the fourth position (below) on “how far” to take an application of the trajectory or movement meaning found within the women texts. Unlike the “concrete hierarchy” of the first two positions by Grudem and Schreiner (above) this third approach within the women texts might be described as “recontextualized hierarchy” or “contextually nuanced hierarchy” inasmuch as it affirms a culturally nuanced reapplication of the principle of hierarchy from Scripture but not necessarily the ongoing applicability of its concrete form. Using a RM hermeneutic alongside of other contextualization considerations, the third position is willing to reconfigure contemporary application of the NT women texts in a way that goes beyond their concrete specificity. As a result, this third view would be open to rethinking the *degree and form* of hierarchy when moving from the NT text to our contemporary context.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding the slavery texts there is not much need for me to interact with this third view. Both the third view and (my) fourth view use a RM hermeneutic and affirm the legitimacy of using movement meaning and the underlying redemptive spirit of the slavery texts as crucial for developing an abolitionist ethic today. Enough said.

With respect to the women texts both the third and fourth views agree on the use of a RM hermeneutic to some extent in sorting out gender issues but differ on precisely where the redemptive movement or trajectory should end. The one position takes the trajectory beyond the concrete specificity of the text to modify the degree and form of hierarchy; the other view sees the

<sup>37</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* 210.

<sup>38</sup> Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, and Mark Strauss have each read a prepublication copy of this paper and have expressed consent to cite themselves as representatives of the third position along the fourfold spectrum.

<sup>39</sup> I do not want to infer that Blomberg, Bock, and Strauss have identical thinking about what the abstracted/broader “principle of hierarchy” or “greater honor” ought to look like in our contemporary context. Within a group-based e-mail correspondence humorous exchanges arose about subdividing the four views with decimal points, e.g. one person might be 2.7 and another 3.2 along the spectrum! Nevertheless, all three would hold that a RM hermeneutic and other between-two-worlds contextualization factors argue in some measure for modifying the *degree and form* of hierarchy beyond the concrete specificity of the NT text.

fullest realization of redemptive movement within an egalitarian application. Once the dust and rhetoric settle in the gender debate, the third and fourth positions along the spectrum are fairly close. There is significant potential for healing and harmony between these two segments within the sometimes brutal debate over women in leadership. That is why, for example, I was delighted to dedicate *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* to both F. F. Bruce and Craig L. Blomberg: "Together they typify egalitarians and hierarchalists who share a redemptive-movement hermeneutic. What they have in common far outweighs any differences."<sup>40</sup>

Those pondering the third position must obviously ask two important questions. First, should one be willing in some measure to reconfigure at least the degree and form of hierarchy when moving from the NT text to our contemporary context? Second, what movement meaning and contextualization factors impact the extent of the trajectory, namely, the "how far" question? A number of considerations ought to resource the discussion and dialogue in this area. Since I have published four pieces addressing these two questions, I will simply cite the sources here: (a) "What if I am Wrong?" chapter in *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*;<sup>41</sup> (b) an *EQ* article;<sup>42</sup> (c) a chapter in *Discovering Biblical Equality*;<sup>43</sup> and most recently (d) a *WTJ* article.<sup>44</sup> While each of these sources discusses using a RM hermeneutic as an application method for going beyond the concrete specificity and isolated-words understanding of the Bible, the last *WJT* source spends the entire article developing just one important contextualization factor (among a much larger grouping), namely, the impact of modern embryology on understanding our present-day application of Paul's creation theology. Developments in embryology studies (not unlike the Copernican revolution) must impact our contemporary application of Paul's creation theology in 1 Corinthians 11 and, as a result, cause us to rethink social-status equations for male and female in a way that significantly changes how we apply the biblical text. Paul's counterbalancing "through woman" argument in 11:12 must be given far more weight within our contemporary context than was ever possible within the ancient world. The spirit of the biblical text within Paul's counterbalancing argument must be heard with much greater emphasis in our modern context, so that our contemporary application goes well beyond the original NT appropriation. We must be willing to let Scripture address our present-day context and application in a way that does not get gridlocked within Paul's original concrete-specific applicational context of first-century Corinth, which in the case of creation theology was significantly limited by the horizons of an ancient world. Only then do we truly honor the underlying biblical argument.

How far ought one to take the trajectory? Well, that is a difficult question. That is far more difficult than figuring out that redemptive-movement mean-

<sup>40</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* 5.

<sup>41</sup> Webb, "What if I am Wrong? [Chapter 8]," in *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* 236–44.

<sup>42</sup> Webb, "A Focused Response to T. R. Schreiner" 327–42.

<sup>43</sup> Webb, "A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic," in *Discovering Biblical Equality* 382–400.

<sup>44</sup> William J. Webb, "Balancing Paul's Original-Creation and Pro-Creation Arguments: 1 Corinthians 11:11–12 in Light of Modern Embryology," *WTJ* 66 (2004) 275–89.

ing exists in the biblical text and that we ought to let it impact our contemporary application of the Bible. In part, it depends upon how one sees the impact of Eden on the application of creation theology. In part, it depends upon how one sees the impact of contemporary embryology, the second creative garden, on creation theology as a whole. In part, it depends upon which components within the text are taken as culturally or situationally bound and which are not. In part, it depends upon how one weighs the lexical and grammatical evidence in certain passages. The list of interpretive determinants could go on; I do not wish to oversimplify the complex aggregate of factors that converge at this point. Nevertheless, the redemptive-movement meaning within the biblical women texts and the weight of other contextualization or between-two-world considerations (one illustrated above)<sup>45</sup> have played a key role in persuading many evangelicals that the best way to honor Scripture is to live in a complementary egalitarian gender framework. Accordingly, we turn to the fourth position.

4. *RMH Abolitionism, Egalitarianism (Webb, et al.)*. A fourth evangelical view, represented by myself and others,<sup>46</sup> embraces a RM hermeneutic as a helpful approach for understanding the slavery and women texts yet differs with the third position (above) on “how far” to take an application of the trajectory found within the women texts. Based upon a RM hermeneutic and other corollary considerations this fourth view would see the ultimate realization of the redemptive spirit within the women texts as a good basis for rethinking *both* the degree/form of hierarchy *and* hierarchy itself. This fourth view finds the fullest realization of a biblical ethic in what might be described as “complementary egalitarianism.” For example, most of the authors within *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (InterVarsity, 2004) would hold to a RM hermeneutic in some form or another. Other volumes by evangelical scholars who advocate for a RM hermeneutic or similar trajectory approaches are those of Craig Keener,<sup>47</sup> R. T. France,<sup>48</sup> Linda Belleville,<sup>49</sup> I. Howard Marshall,<sup>50</sup> Glen Scorgie,<sup>51</sup> and John Stackhouse.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>45</sup> For a detailed development of other contextualization (between two worlds) factors see the footnotes 41–44 above.

<sup>46</sup> See footnotes 41–44 above and 47–52 below.

<sup>47</sup> Craig Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992) 184–224.

<sup>48</sup> R. T. France, *Women in the Church's Ministry: A Test Case for Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 94–95.

<sup>49</sup> Linda L. Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 119–20.

<sup>50</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 1–136.

<sup>51</sup> Glen Scorgie, *Journey Back to Eden: Restoring the Creator's Design for Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming) 1–176.

<sup>52</sup> John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Finally Feminist: A Pragmatic Christian Understanding of Gender* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

IV. BROADER EVANGELICAL DISCUSSIONS  
ABOUT APPLYING SCRIPTURE AND DOING THEOLOGY

This paper has introduced three perspectives for how our contemporary application might at times go beyond the concrete specificity of the biblical text: (a) Grudem's exchange of physical symbols; (b) Schreiner's invoking of higher principles; and (c) Webb's appeal to redemptive-movement meaning. Yet, other models are emerging in this broader discussion about the hermeneutics of application and theology. A RM hermeneutic is not the only method that engages the question of how to apply Scripture when moving from the biblical text itself to a fuller realization of certain aspects of underlying or implicit textual and canonical meaning for the development of social ethics and theology.

Therefore, it is important to set a RM hermeneutic within the broader context of evangelical discussions about applying Scripture and doing theology. Using slightly different language I. Howard Marshall and Kevin Vanhoozer respectively speak of our need to develop models for "going beyond the Bible biblically"<sup>53</sup> and "continuing Scripture in new contexts."<sup>54</sup> In the Baker publication, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (2004), I. Howard Marshall, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Stanley Porter explore alternative models for wrestling with the same issues of moving from the biblical text to application and theology that a RM hermeneutic attempts to address. At a recent conference in Canada (January 2005) Gary Meadors, who himself holds a "values-driven" model, presented a very insightful paper that set the discussion about a RM hermeneutic within the larger landscape of emerging evangelical proposals about how to move from the text to application and theology.<sup>55</sup> An upcoming regional ETS meeting in Grand Rapids (March 2006) will focus on the topic of models for "going beyond the Bible biblically" (the conference title borrows the Marshall and Vanhoozer turn of phrase) with a variety of presenters developing alternative approaches.<sup>56</sup>

As the dialogue about a RM hermeneutic continues, a number of questions must be asked in the context of these broader discussions about alternative

<sup>53</sup> Within my contribution to *Discovering Biblical Equality* and within this present article I have consciously altered my language (never placing "going beyond" immediately next to "the Bible" as the direct object) in order to work harder on my part at being properly understood. Nevertheless, as an alternative to my bulky "going beyond an isolated words understanding of the biblical text" or "going beyond the concrete specificity of the biblical text" some are introducing the important qualifying adjective "biblically" to communicate the succinct idea of "going beyond the Bible biblically" (Marshall) while others are more comfortable with expressing essentially the same notion by talking about "continuing Scripture in new contexts" (Vanhoozer). At present I would favor blending my updated bulky expressions with the Vanhoozer language. However, perhaps I have adopted an overly cautious posturing given my present attempts to untangle layers of misunderstanding.

<sup>54</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible* 88, 95.

<sup>55</sup> Gary T. Meadors, "Probing the Redemptive Movement Model" (paper presented at a conference on hermeneutics at Heritage Seminary, Cambridge, ON, January 17, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> The Midwest ETS meeting in March 24–25, 2006 will highlight at least three "going beyond" models: a narrative model (Lissa Wray Beal, Providence Seminary), a theological model (Daniel J. Treier, Wheaton College), and a redemptive trajectory model (William J. Webb, Heritage Seminary).

ways of going beyond the concrete specificity of the biblical text. For instance, are any of these methods acceptable for evangelical hermeneutics? Are some methods acceptable but not others? Are these methods mutually exclusive or can some be combined in a complementary fashion? What are the checks and balances to ensure that we do indeed go beyond the isolated or concrete specific words of the Bible in a *biblical* fashion? These questions clearly invite dialogue amongst all evangelicals about the proposals already on the table. Hopefully these questions also invite new proposals that might do an even better job of fulfilling our hermeneutical task whether that be through replacing, refining, or augmenting existing proposals. We should all be thankful for the gift of community as we seek to think through how it is that God would have us interpret and apply his Word in our lives.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper seeks to encourage dialogue among four emerging views on a RM hermeneutic. After presenting a brief example of a RM hermeneutic within the slavery texts, I attempted to work through certain misunderstandings and misconceptions that have impeded discussions about a RM hermeneutic. With hopes that a more accurate portrait will strengthen future conversations, the paper walked through the current landscape of four evangelical views on a RM hermeneutic. Even so, in thinking through these four views our focus must be more encompassing. A RM hermeneutic is not the only evangelical proposal on the table. Dialogue about a RM hermeneutic is best understood within the broader context of evangelical discussions about a variety of proposals for applying Scripture in a biblically faithful way that moves beyond the concrete specificity of the text.

The challenge for all evangelicals within this dialogue about hermeneutics is to hold our respective positions with an “open palm.” I myself must be willing to say, “I may be wrong.” In other words, there needs to be a shared conviction that a higher value is the pursuit of truth and not the preservation of our individual preunderstandings. Each of these four evangelical views affirms Scripture as our deeply cherished anchor for truth and our final authority for faith and practice, despite the fact that we may all feel that our own particular approach does a better job of living out such affirmations. Consequently, each view needs to take one step back from assumptions of methodological certainty and recognize the authenticity within our respective affirmations about the authority of Scripture. If we celebrate these shared higher values—biblical authority and the pursuit of truth—along with a healthy dose of hermeneutical humility, there is a good chance that our dialogue can be pleasant and enjoyable regardless of which of the four views are exchanging ideas.