

Theological overview

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1 Introduction: Dinah's silence and Jesus' dust

In Genesis 34, a strange event happens in the middle of Jacob's story. He has returned home after working 20 years for Laban, wrestled with God, and finally met Esau and discovered that their epic sibling rivalry might, at last, be over. God is about to appear to him one more time and to tell him to return to Bethel, where he once dreamt a stairway to heaven; before that happens, however, he pauses and tries to settle at a Canaanite city. There his daughter Dinah is raped (34: 2); through the rest of the chapter her father, her brothers, the rapist, and his father, argue and then fight over how to deal with this situation. Dinah's voice, however, is unheard; we never learn what she feels, what a good way forward for her would look like.

In John 8: 1-11 we hear another tale of sex, violence, and silence. A woman, this time not even named, 'caught in the act of adultery' — and so presumably naked, or all but — is dragged publicly by a group of men and thrown in front of another man, with the demand that he sentence her to death by stoning. This time he is silent, at least for a while, writing in the dust with his finger. Eventually he speaks, and refuses to condone further violence, even if, according to Jewish law, it was deemed a just punishment; instead, he challenges the men who had dragged her before him, and the crowd who no doubt had gathered to watch, as to which of them was morally pure enough to pass judgement. The story also conceals something odd: 'the act of adultery' tends to involve two people; did the man escape — or did they let him go?

**“ONE IN THREE
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2 Gender based violence

Gender based violence (GBV) refers to acts of physical violence committed or instituted by men and boys against women and girls. It is astonishingly common: good statistics suggest that one in three women around the world will suffer GBV during her lifetime¹; in the UK, where we might hope and expect the figures to be very different, in fact they are only slightly better: government figures suggest that something like one in four UK women will suffer abuse at some point during their lifetime at the hands of a man².

We should pause and consider just how horrific these figures are: in a church congregation of a hundred people, sixty are likely to be female; fifteen women in that congregation, then, will have experienced abuse, or will be experiencing abuse, or will experience abuse at some point in their future lives. The best statistics we have suggest that rates of abuse in UK churches do not differ significantly from the national average³. In a homegroup of twelve people, eight of whom are female, there will be two past, present, or future victims of abuse. The numbers are awful. The problem is huge.

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¹ According to the United Nations. See www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures

² A number of surveys point to this figure. For details see www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-violence-articles.asp?section=00010001002200410001&itemid=1280&itemTitle=Statistics%3A+how+common+is+domestic+violence

³ The data on abuses in churches is not extensive, but a Methodist survey in 2002 suggested a figure of 25% of women suffering abuse. See www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-domestic-violence-the-way-forward-2002.pdf

But why talk specifically about gender based violence, instead of focusing on condemning all violence indiscriminately? And why focus on male-perpetrated violence, ignoring violence committed by women against men? These are appropriate questions to ask; the answer lies in understanding what we mean by gender.

3 Sex and gender: creation and culture

If we are to understand GBV we need to understand what we mean by 'gender' and how it is different from 'sex': we can start with two definitions:

- ✦ Sex is our created, biological maleness and femaleness
- ✦ Gender is our cultural conformity to ideas of masculinity and femininity

Most human beings are born unambiguously male or female⁴: a basic chromosomal difference (XX or XY) results in obvious physical differences, initially at birth in genitalia and reproductive organs, and then following the onset of puberty in body shape, patterns of hair-growth, etc. This is sex.

As we grow up all of us are *inculturated*: we are taught to confirm to certain cultural norms. These can be fairly trivial but highly visible, such as learning what is appropriate to wear in certain contexts, or they can be very deep, like learning acceptable ways of expressing grief or anger.

“[‘GENDER’:] SUBTLE PATTERNS OF DIFFERENCE THAT PERPETUATE AND REINFORCE DEEP CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS”

Obviously, these norms vary from culture to culture. Some of these norms are common to everyone in a culture, but others are different for different people. Perhaps people born into certain social classes in a society learn to dress differently, for instance. It happens that in every human society we know of cultural norms vary for men and women; we describe the different constructions of what it is to be masculine or feminine as 'gender'.

Again, gender differences can be obvious but fairly trivial, or deeper and more controversial; some can be both. Pre-teen girls almost invariably begin to experiment with cosmetics; whilst in certain subcultures ('Glam'; more recently, 'Goth' or 'Emo') older boys might also regularly use make-up, its use is unquestionably 'gendered' – different for males and females – in Western cultures.

At first sight, this is trivial: what does it matter that young girls tend to experiment with lipstick more than young boys? But, when we combine it with other gender differences in our culture, we might begin to see a pattern where an unspoken but powerful expectation is in place that women will strive for – unattainable – standards of beauty, an expectation that 'objectifies'⁵ women by locating their value in their appearance, not in their essential humanity, abilities, skills or achievements. This is 'gender': subtle patterns of difference that perpetuate and reinforce deep cultural assumptions.

“HEADSHIP IS A CHOSEN PRACTICE, NOT AN INEVITABLE OCCURRENCE”

4 Sex and gender in Scripture

The biblical basis for sex is obvious: Genesis 1. The Bible also knows all about gender. The famous hymn describing the *Eshet Chayil*, the 'woman of valour' in Proverbs 31 displays various assumptions about gender. Her husband sits at the gate of the city (verse 23) with the other men, deciding matters to do with public civic life; she is not active in civic life, but runs home and business, buying and selling, trading for a profit (verse 18), and giving charity (verse 20). There is no reason beyond cultural norms why mercantile and charitable work should be her sphere, not his, or why public life should be his sphere, not hers, but this is the picture painted. We find a different

⁴ About 0.05% of people are born with some degree of sexual ambiguity.

⁵ 'Objectify' simply means 'treat as an object' (as opposed to a subject, a person who does things in her own right).

picture in the ‘household codes’ in Paul’s letters (and in 1 Peter), which place different – gendered – expectations on husband and wife in marriage. Even if we think that these commands represent a universal norm that all should conform to, the fact that they are *commands* shows us that this is gender, not sex: authority and submission are chosen patterns of behaviour that will be encouraged or discouraged by cultural expectations and by patterns of behaviour that are considered normal; even if male headship and female submission are proper Christian virtues, then they are still ‘gendered’: headship, unlike the propensity to grow a beard, is a chosen practice, not an inevitable occurrence.

5 Understanding gender based violence

The point about gender based violence is it is gender based, not sex based. The way we construct our masculinity and femininity leads to certain assumptions about patterns of behaviour that render violence culturally acceptable. When women and girls are objectified, GBV can be seen as somehow less heinous, more acceptable, than other forms of violence – and this is why male-on-female GBV must be considered as a distinct reality. Cultural patterns of gender relations render this violence normal and justifiable. The outworking of this runs from the – terrifyingly – common assumption that it is acceptable, indeed sometimes necessary, for a man to beat his partner, through the assumption that soldiers raping female civilians in occupied territories in war is inevitable, to the requirement that girls are subjected to genital mutilation, early and child marriage, and are frequently deemed less worthy of receiving education and health care. At the same time, objectification justifies, and in turn is strengthened by, cultural practices such as pornography, which renders a woman a thing to be looked at and consumed, rather than a person to be related to. The ultimate act of devaluation is murder: the infanticide of the girl child.

“[CULTURAL PRACTICES SUCH AS] PORNOGRAPHY RENDERS A WOMAN A THING TO BE CONSUMED, RATHER THAN A PERSON TO BE RELATED TO”

How do we read a biblical text such as the story of Dinah (we might add the stories of Tamar, Jephthah’s daughter, the Levite’s concubine from Judges 19, and others)? The text bears sober witness to the fact that she has been comprehensively objectified: her voice is nothing, and so unheard; her story is presented as no more than an occasion or excuse for men to squabble over their political desires. The Bible is unremittingly honest and realistic: GBV – here, rape – is a reality that is made culturally imaginable, and in a sense acceptable, by the objectifying of women.

“THE CULTURAL DOMINANCE OF MEN OVER WOMEN IS VISIBLE AND CLEAR”

At the same time, we need to be aware of differential power relations. The way we construct culture, men are more politically/culturally powerful than women. This is a statistical judgement, not an absolute one; the UK has had a female prime minister; but the evidence for the general statement is overwhelming. Nearly 50 years – a working lifetime – after the Equal Pay Act (1970) became law, there are still persistent gender disparities in salaries: women are paid 18.6 per cent less than men⁶. Despite much publicity and various attempts at positive discrimination to right the imbalances, the proportion of women in parliament is still woefully low – only just over 20 per cent. These statistics could be multiplied endlessly. In societies less developed than the UK, these differentials manifest as straightforward economic abuse of women; in the UK, and other developed societies, they persist as statistical gaps. Either way, the cultural dominance of men over women is visible and clear.

These two UK examples are significant, however: there has been a legal duty to equalise pay since 1970, strengthened several times; there has been considerable effort put into raising

⁶ According to the Fawcett Society, who draw on ONS statistics. See www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/equal-pay/#sthash.UX5kDypg.dpbs

the number of women in Parliament, including one major party adopting women-only candidate lists for certain seats and the like. In the face of legal pressure and direct action, how is it that inequalities still persist? Why can all our best efforts not change such manifest injustices?

6 Principalities, powers and patriarchy

Gender inequalities like this exist in every culture that lives, or has lived, on the planet, as far as we know. Human cultures are extraordinarily varied in most things; why is this so uniform? Gender theory has given us a concept, 'patriarchy'; but the Bible might help us explain how this works.

'Patriarchy' means literally 'the rule of the fathers'. A patriarchal society is one where power is concentrated in the hands of men, not women – which means almost every human society today and in history is, or was, patriarchal. It might be possible to imagine a society which stresses male headship whilst refusing violence, but, historically it is clear that, almost inevitably, GBV is both a result of and a support for patriarchy. On the one hand, men who believe that they have, or should have, power over women can feel justified in resorting to violence to demonstrate or claim this power; on the other hand, the constant, even if unspoken, threat of violence inevitably discourages women from seeking to assert themselves against the patriarchal norms. Both these dynamics are worth exploring in a little more depth.

“POWER IS CONCENTRATED IN THE HANDS OF MEN, NOT WOMEN”

The idea of a man feeling justified in using violence against women might be most familiar to most of us in the socially-inadequate rapist/murderer of crime fiction; the reality is more banal, far more widespread, and more worrying. A 1998 UK study found that about 20 per cent of young men, and about 10 percent of young women thought that a man using violence to control his partner in a relationship was acceptable⁷. Here patriarchal assumptions that a man should control his partner, using violence if necessary, have become normalised for a frightening number of people. And it is worth bearing in mind that this figure is for those who admit the attitude when questioned; the number of people who would justify or explain away committed violence without being prepared to justify in this way is no doubt far higher. Patriarchal attitudes justify GBV.

Similarly, however, GBV sustains patriarchy. The most visible examples recently have been women who have become visible figureheads for challenges to patriarchy on social media, particularly Twitter. In every case, they have received a torrent of vituperative comeback, much or most of it threatening graphic sexual violence. The particular power of such threats is their basic cultural plausibility: in a culture where rape is common, a threat of rape can only be taken with complete seriousness. As someone has put it, 'As long as some men use physical force to subjugate females, all men need not⁸'; the reality of GBV affects and distorts every relationship, even if violence has never been imagined within that particular relationship.

“PATRIARCHAL ASSUMPTIONS HAVE BECOME NORMALISED FOR A FRIGHTENING NUMBER OF PEOPLE”

Can we understand this powerful and insidious reality theologically? The Bible speaks of the existence of spiritual powers that shape human culture, the 'principalities and powers' in Paul's language. Paul imagines spiritual realities that give shape to human culture but that are distorted, leading to our cultures being warped and broken in far-reaching ways. Often, perhaps, we will be able to see something of the distortion, but unable to escape it (we might think of our recent experiences of the global financial system). If we understand

⁷ This figures come from a 1998 study, but smaller, more recent, studies show no essential change. Burton, S, Kitzinger, J, Kelly, L and Regan, L (1998). *Young People's Attitudes Towards Violence, Sex and Relationships: A survey and focus group study*. Zero Tolerance Charitable Trust, Glasgow and Manchester City Councils and Fife Council: Scotland.

⁸ Marilyn French, *The War against Women* (New York: Summit Books, 1992), p. 182.

patriarchy in these terms, a twisted spiritual power that infects and warps human culture as a result of the breach of our fundamental relationship with God, we might find a good biblical account that makes sense of the cultural data we have been looking at.



The first picture of gendered relationship in Scripture is one of easy mutuality. As the famous Puritan Matthew Henry has it, 'the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him.' We then turn to the curse that follows human sin in Genesis 3: that text speaks of the fracturing of several relationships as a result of the fracturing of the fundamental relationship between God and humanity: in particular, human relationship with creation will be warped, resulting in, paradigmatically, toil and struggle in agriculture; and the relationship between women and men is fractured, with desire and domination replacing the previous easy mutuality.

“ DESIRE AND DOMINATION REPLACE EASY MUTUALITY ”

This account should not be heard as hopeless. The verdict in Genesis 3 is a curse; it is not how life should be; and we are allowed, indeed called, by God to seek to minimise the damage here. We use technology to make our agriculture easier, by God's grace ameliorating that aspect of the curse, and we should expect similarly by God's grace to be able to reshape our interpersonal relations to escape the worst of the brokenness. Further, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is centred around the reversal of this curse. In the gospels, for example in the story from John 8 we began with, we see Jesus refusing to collude with patriarchal assumptions and attitudes, treating the women he meets with respect and humanity. The Church, as the place where Jesus' redemption is known, and where the first fruits of the kingdom are being enjoyed, should be the place above any other where patriarchal attitudes are being recognised, named, confronted and overthrown.

“ THE CHURCH SHOULD BE A BEACON AND A REFUGE AND A PLACE OF HEALING FOR SURVIVORS ”

Again, Paul's witness concerning the principalities and powers is fundamentally hopeful: in his saving work, Jesus has broken their power, overcome them, led them chained in triumphal procession to demonstrate publicly his victory. If patriarchy is such a 'principality', in Jesus its power has been broken, and in the church we should see a new society where 'there is no male and female,' where 'sons and daughters will prophesy,' where 'the Spirit will be poured out' on all people, 'both men and women'.

The Church should be a beacon and a refuge for survivors and perpetrators of GBV: a place of healing for survivors, and a place of confession, repentance, and re-creation for perpetrators.