On male violence: a theological reflection on Genesis 4:19–24

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Lamech said to his wives, “Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.” (Gen 4:23–24 NIV)

Why is it to his wives that Lamech announces his fearfulness? The Hebrew narrative emphasises the point that it is Adah and Zillah whom he wants to hear this. They are “wives of Lamech”—a third person self-reference designed to remind them of their status, rather than allowing the vulnerability that might come with the first person, “my wives.” This is a moment of deliberate subjugation, enforced with a threat of terrible, retributive violence, should any minor wrong be done to him. It is the first moment in the Bible of violence directed by a husband towards a wife.

Lamech is the first of another corruption of family life: polygamy. “Lamech married two women,” we are told just a little earlier (Gen 4:19). In the flow of the narrative there is no doubt that this is to be understood as an evil thing. As Robert Alter and others have reminded us, Hebrew narratives are subtle; they make their points often implicitly, by associating actions with characters or events, and inviting the reader to make connections.¹

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Here, things are not really all that subtle. Polygamy emerges in the aftermath of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the garden, where the union of the man with the woman had been a moment of delight and fulfilment: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” Moreover, the first polygamist is a wicked man, a violent man, who is willing to repay, not “eye for eye,” as the law would later prescribe, but with gross disproportion.

Lamech’s story is meant to tell us about the possibilities that will emerge for humanity in its newfound situation, having embraced the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Some of these possibilities are hopeful. His sons, we are told, found new patterns of organised agriculture, culture, and art (Gen 4:20–22). But overall, the outlook is bleak; and it is Lamech’s family life that shows us this most clearly. What we see with Lamech is an early flowering of the corruption of marriage that began at the first moment after the fall, when Adam turned upon his wife, saying, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Gen 3:12). The delight and vulnerability glimpsed for a moment at the beginning (Gen 2:23–24) are gone. Now this is simply “the woman you put here with me,” a burden, an imposition upon Adam’s contented loneliness. Conflict and suspicion have come in, so that now the woman is told: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16). Whatever exactly this upsetting sentence means, it is a horrible fall from the original promise of marriage. The original, life-giving mutuality of man and woman has turned into a disturbing and unstable combination of magnetism and domination. The man is the woman’s inescapable other, and the woman the man’s; they are incomprehensible alone. Yet their being together is now tense and problematic. What we see in Lamech is one of the places to which these patterns can lead: to polygamy, and to violence; to control of wives, as possessions and emblems of prestige, through threats of retribution and fear. It is, and ought to be, horrifying.

The purpose of this brief piece is to ask what can be learned from this text for our understanding of domestic abuse and family violence perpetrated by men. There are, of course, other critical ways to engage with this question, and the aim is not to suggest that these can be dispensed with simply by looking at the Bible. The aim, rather, is to show that, within this discussion and amongst other insights, there is a place for looking at the Bible. Male violence is a complex phenomenon, “associated,” in the words of a wide-ranging UN report on male violence against women in Asia and
the Pacific, “with a complex interplay of factors at the individual, relationship, community and greater society levels,” which “cannot be understood in isolation and should be understood as existing within a broader environment of pervasive gender inequality.”3 The complexity and pervasiveness of male violence against women suggests that understanding it may require a turn to fundamental questions of human existence. This, at least, is what the story of Lamech suggests is needed.

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Domestic abuse and family violence is done overwhelmingly by men, as are most other forms of violence, from crime, to war, to suicide. Recently, the very welcome, increased cultural attention to the problem of domestic and family violence has focussed on a theological division surrounding gender and marriage. There are, in truth, a range of positions; but for the sake of argument they can be grouped into two. On one side are “complementarians,” who maintain that the differences between men and women are good and important, and have certain implications for the life of church and family, including that there is a right order in marriage in which the husband is in some sense placed in authority. Men and women are complementary—equal, but importantly different, partners in marriage and church. On the other side are “egalitarians,” who maintain that whatever real and good differences there may be between men and women, their basic equality means that there can be no place for hierarchy. Men and women are equal—perhaps, yes, also different and complementary; but not in such a way as to justify subordination of one to the other. (The debate, it should be clear, cannot, therefore, be settled by labels: “complementarians” believe in equality, and “egalitarians” believe in complementarity; they just disagree about what these things mean.) Both sides appeal to scriptural and theological warrants for their positions.

This debate has persisted for many years. The stakes have been heightened, however, by recent writings that have argued that complementarian positions contribute to domestic violence.4 The argument has come in more and less subtle versions. The less subtle version is that complementarian positions justify violence against women. Although this is sadly true sometimes, it is not true of most complementarian positions, which, if they know at all what they are about, continually highlight that what husbands are called to
in the Bible is to *love* their wives: “husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church” (Eph 5:25). The subtler version of the argument is that, whatever may be said along these lines, complementarian positions cannot adequately resist domestic abuse. By speaking of a right order in relationships, they tend to lend legitimacy to destructive power relationships, and open a door to abuse. There is no doubt that this argument should be taken seriously.

The aim of this reflection is not to weigh into this question directly but instead to highlight something that I think has not been sufficiently appreciated: what the Bible implies about the phenomenon of male violence. What egalitarians and complementarians ought to be able to agree on is this: since the fall, violence has been a particular problem for men. It is not, of course, that women cannot be violent. Certainly, they can be—and there are violent women in the Bible. It is, however, to say that violence is a *particular* problem for men. Though not a uniquely male challenge, and not a challenge for all men, it is a distinctively male challenge. It is something that men are more likely to have to wrestle with than women. Lamech shows us that violence, and domestic abuse, have been present right from the start—primordial corruptions of marriage that have haunted humanity throughout its lifetime. This is something that both parties in this debate should be able to acknowledge, even though they will interpret it in different ways.

What difference would it make for complementarians to take this point on more fully? It would, I think, be a warning to complementarians not to underestimate the problem of domestic abuse and family violence, and the potential of their schemes of thought to be abused in its service. Lamech’s shadow hangs over human existence, passed down through family patterns and legacies, continually and tragically renewed, laced throughout assumptions about gender and sexuality, and encoded into patterns of social relations, customs, and legal regimes. It cannot be reduced to simple, individual struggles; it is in a real sense a *structural* issue, and so will not easily be escaped. Church teaching that merely does not endorse violence, or mentions it in passing, cannot be adequate. The potential to be violent is deeply rooted in us. The call to love our wives may, indeed, be at the heart of a remedy. But it is a remedy that, at the very least, needs to be applied diligently, with care, supported by explanation, reminder, recalled again and again. If we are going to teach that there is a right order between men and women in marriage and church life, then we must commit to being vigilant against abuse and self-deception, because we know that, since Adam, this
has often involved a “rule” that is tragically far from Christ's loving care for his church.

What about egalitarians? What difference might this point make for them? The challenge the story of Lamech poses to egalitarians is not to be tempted into a reductive understanding of the kind of structural problem domestic abuse is. Thoughtful investigators of gender-based violence recognise that the structural forces involved go very deep. It is not simply a matter of factors such as, for example, access to alcohol or rates of under-employment. These are significant and intractable enough, yet the roots of the problem lie deeper, in basic assumptions and habits that are even more difficult to shift. The problem is with “patriarchy” and “gender inequality.” The challenge posed by the story of Lamech in its biblical location is not to allow such descriptions to lose the full depth of their meaning, through their correlation to a particular set of social and political policies. Lamech shows us that the history of male violence goes back almost to the very beginning, and is rooted in the dynamics of humanity’s primal fall. This means that the structures of power relations that contribute to domestic abuse are not simply arbitrary, accidental forms our societies and cultures happened to take. They are an outworking of dynamics that are basic within human existence. The painful question Lamech thrusts upon us is whether the gender inequality that precipitates gender violence is not simply an accidental, socio-political inequality, which can, in principle, be resolved through effective structural change, but is an “inequality” that is more basic to human existence: simply the non-identity of male and female as it is experienced after the fall. Structural changes, therefore, that limit and resist patriarchy, though critical, may also be inadequate, and should be expected to spawn new manifestations of male frustration. The persistence of ideas about hierarchy can exacerbate this male tendency; but clearly it can flourish without it, which is why egalitarian churches, too, face the problem of domestic abuse. Complementarian positions may, infuriatingly, contribute to and perpetuate this problem, but they are not all there is to it. And they may not be wrong to imagine that the solution must involve an attempt to take seriously and affirm the differences between men and women. Those of us, therefore, who see the better path marked out by equal roles for men and women must be ready also to admit that this can only be part of the solution, and that it does not spare us the challenging task of learning to walk a different path. For, as Adam’s children, like Lamech, we
so often use our strength not for service of others, but for ourselves at the expense of others.

One way of re-interpreting the disagreement between complementarians and egalitarians, then, is to say that it arises from a focus on different aspects of the root problem we see in Lamech, with consequently different accounts of the solution. It is a different focus that one might see as mirroring common left/right political disagreements over individual responsibility and structural causality. For egalitarians, the root problem is patriarchy: the unjust subordination of women to men, the inevitable tendencies of which emerge with Lamech. The solution therefore primarily involves structural equality. Hearts like Lamech’s cannot be changed while the patriarchy is sustained. Lamech’s “authority” is a prison, locking him into patterns of violence and objectification that are as dehumanising of him as they are destructive of his wives. These patterns of violence and subjection will be overcome only by learning new patterns of reciprocity and mutual submission of men and women to one another. When Lamech gives up his privileged position and authority, then his viciousness may begin to come undone.

Complementarians, on the other hand, think that Lamech’s authority, though perhaps an important part of the issue, is not itself the problem. The problem, rather, lies in Lamech himself, and his tendency to corrupt his authority such that it acquires an unjust and destructive form, a “rule” that is destructive. Complementarians therefore worry that an embrace of the kind of equality proposed by egalitarians will not really solve the problem. For they think that the differences between men and women are such that a structure of formal equality will actually stifle what both truly need in order to grow. They hope that, rather than creating an opening for exploitation, the responsibility involved in authority will, through the grace of God and aided by a wife’s respect, allow a love to grow that could not have grown otherwise.

But can one responsibly hold such a position, given that all sides agree, or ought to, that however we think men and women were intended to relate, the fact is that this relation has often taken the kind of shape we see in Lamech? Is this not playing with fire? Several things need to be said at this point that are not mine to say. Most of all, the stories of victims of
abuse must be heard again and again, and given their rightful weight. I will, however, seek to make one point, because it is one on which the story of Lamech bears.

Although it may be true that not all complementarian positions should be ruled out on the basis of their vulnerability to abuse by perpetrators of domestic violence—I do not think they should be—there are ways of holding a complementarian position that are irresponsible. In particular, I think we may say that it is irresponsible to hold a complementarian position while simultaneously making it very difficult for someone to leave a marriage. The issue is not quite whether marriages are “indissoluble” (that is, permanently enduring whatever happens), though this is a related issue. But the crucial question is whether someone, their marriage somehow enduring or not, is able to physically leave their partner. Even for advocates of a indissolubilist position, there should be room for this, given the apostle Paul’s instruction as to how someone who separates should subsequently behave, in 1 Corinthians 7:11—an instruction that, in Australia and many other places, finds a valuable aid in the legal distinction between separation and divorce. Frequently in churches, however, little room for separation is allowed. The evil of divorce is loudly proclaimed, along with the need to forgive.

And here, once more, we find Lamech. When asked by Peter how many times he must forgive his brother when he sins against him, Jesus answers with an allusion to Lamech: “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:21–22). Deployed in the context of marriage, alongside a prohibition on divorce that amounts to a prohibition on separation, this teaching can be used to make it almost impossible for a woman to feel justified in leaving her husband. But should this text be used in this way? It should not. For it is not a teaching about marriage as such, but about relationships between Christian people. It may have implications for marriage, but much changes when it is applied in that way. Immediately after this teaching, Jesus tells a parable about forgiveness (Matt 18:23–34). In each relationship in this parable, all the power lies with the person in a position to forgive. The debtor is in each case extremely vulnerable because of their debt. Things are strikingly different in an abusive marriage. The whole difficulty is that the power dynamics run the other way. The perpetrator of abuse is not truly vulnerable, and especially not if the person experiencing abuse is not really free, and indeed entitled, to leave.
What difference does this make? It makes a great difference, I think, to the meaning of the call to forgive in this situation. If, following the parable, the normal case of forgiveness involves a kind of foregoing of the debt one is owed by someone else, because of which that person is vulnerable, then when there is no such vulnerability, forgiveness must also take on a different shape. An abusive husband can only ask his wife to forgive him if he is willing to become vulnerable to her in proportion to his offenses. If he is not willing to become vulnerable in this way, then although she may be able to forgive from her side, handing over her injured right to God and extending an offer of grace, her forgiveness is frustrated; it is prevented from becoming effective in the relationship. She is, in a sense, not able to forgive him. A situation of abuse, therefore, can quickly become one in which there is, in an important respect, no real possibility of forgiveness within the relationship, so long as the partners remain together. Paradoxically, in such a situation the call to forgive might actually draw a person out of the marriage, in order to recover some semblance of truth about the relationship, without which forgiveness can only be frustrated. The call to forgive cannot be turned into a command never to leave a marriage. That is to misunderstand the nature of forgiveness. Without an abuser’s vulnerability before his victim, forgiveness in the relationship must be frustrated, because forgiveness fundamentally depends upon a shared grasp on the truth of the wrong that has been done.

In my judgment, therefore, it is irresponsible to teach a complementarian position on marriage whilst simultaneously closing off space for people to leave their marriages. The combination of these emphases is a recipe for disaster, and ought to be acknowledged as such. For it closes off space for the possibility of real forgiveness, and the disclosure of truth that it brings, without which no true change will be possible. Complementarian positions ought to be accompanied by clear teaching that sometimes marriages ought to be left, and with a willingness on the part of the community to assist with this if necessary.

Jesus knew what he was doing when he reminded us of Lamech. His words set before us two visions of human existence, and within that, two visions of masculinity. On the one hand, there is Lamech with his threats and his violence, his pride, and his brutality. On the other hand, there is Jesus, with
his forgiveness that goes far beyond what is reasonable, all the way to death. Who is the man who is truly strong? Who is the man whose dignity is secure? It is not Lamech. It is no easy thing to admit to being one of Lamech’s heirs. If we will do it without giving up the attempt to live well as men, we will need the guidance and the grace of the one on whom Lamech’s shadow did not fall, and who carved out a new vision for men, and for women.

**Endnotes**


5. For one nuanced analysis, see the UN study cited above.