

# THE PROBLEM OF MEN'S VIOLENCE:

## STUDY GUIDE



BY  
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INTRODUCTION BY  
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A CREATIVE MINISTRIES NETWORK CONGREGATION STUDY GUIDE  
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## VIOLENCE DEFINED

# THE PROBLEM OF MEN'S VIOLENCE: STUDY GUIDE

- Unjust force, actions or words used, without informed consent, to intimidate or harm;
- actions that are irreverent or disrespectful of another or others, and
- that are used, consciously or unconsciously, to obtain power over another or others, causing pain to the whole person (body / mind / soul / spirit).

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<sup>1</sup>J. Atkinson, *Trauma Trails Recreating Song Lines: the transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia* (North Melbourne Spinifex Press, 2011), xi.



## INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> *The more I travel the world, the more I am saddened to see to what extent women are being instrumentalized, rejected and dehumanized and how social customs continue to keep them in a category of sub-humans ~ Denis Mukwege*

<sup>2</sup> *I firmly believe today that the only way to stop violence against women is to speak out and refuse to be silenced ~ Zainab Salbi.*

We live in an age characterized by the extravagance of all types of violence. Amongst them is the increasing incidence of abuse and violence against women and children. Sexual violence is not only rampant but grotesque, brazen, and brutal - depicting the cruelty and horrors of male power; of male triumphalism; of female vulnerability, fear, and helplessness, of powerlessness, abuse, and annihilation. Family, sexual, and domestic violence has become a major issue in the world, especially during these covid days, so much so that it has been termed a "shadow pandemic" by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka – Head of UN Women, who also says,

*[T]he violence that is emerging now as a dark feature of this pandemic is a mirror and a challenge to our values, our resilience and shared humanity.*

<sup>1</sup> Congolese gynecologist and Pentecostal pastor, 2018 recipient of the Nobel peace Prize. Dr Mukwege founded *Panzi Hospital and Foundation* and has become one of the world's leading specialists on treating survivors of wartime sexual violence. See, "Liberated by God's Grace – Keynote address" in *Liberated by God's Grace: Assembly Report* (Geneva, Switzerland: LWF, 2018), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Iraqi American women's rights activist, writer, and public speaker. She is the Founder of *Women for Women International*.

<sup>3</sup> Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, "Violence Against Women and Girls: The Shadow Pandemic," UN Women, April 6, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/2vvda994>

<sup>4</sup> AIHW, "Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence," (16 Sept 2021).  
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence#women>

<sup>5</sup> AIHW, "Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence," (16 Sept 2021).  
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence#women>

*We must not only survive the coronavirus, but emerge renewed, with women as a powerful force at the centre of recovery.<sup>3</sup>*

The figures coming out of surveys done in Australia are bleak. An online survey of 15,000 women found that between February and April of 2020, 4.6% of women experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner. Sixty-five percent of women said the violence had either started or escalated since the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> In 2020 therefore, 54% or 70,000 recorded assaults were related to family and domestic violence (excluding Victoria and Queensland), a 7.8% increase from 65,000 in 2019., and almost 2 in 5 (37% or 82) recorded murders were related to family and



domestic violence (ABS 2021).<sup>5</sup> It is not clear from the figures available, how many of these are immigrant women, women of colour, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women. It has been suggested and proven that their experiences are insufficiently addressed, for example, in the framing of domestic violence policies. Australian government documents "do not engage with the complexities of the intersection of gender and other social categories," such as race, ethnicity, immigration status.<sup>6</sup> To understand the experience of abused women, the total dimensions of their lives, including all their identity makers such as socioeconomic status, age, and culture (race, language, ethnicity), need to be considered.

To listen to the many stories of domestic and workplace violence, sexual assault and harassment that feature in our news, is to enter into and inhabit a world of unrelenting and absolute terror that women experience and all too often. They leave a deep scar on the Australian conscience and expose the ugliness, the disease in the culture/s which has not been adequately addressed. These figures, disturbing and sad, indicate that despite the progress that has been made in the areas of women's rights, privileges, access to opportunities, in countries such as Australia, female subordination, disadvantage and the second-class treatment of women is still very much entrenched in the Australian psyche and

in all spheres of social life.

The signs of hope in relation to this issue, lie in the efforts and attempts by various factions of society, religious and secular, to bring awareness to this issue and the responses of women and sensitized men and groups who persevere against what might be rendered as a desensitization to the banality of sexual violence. This is because gender violence performs a didactic function in socializing men and women. The perverse logic of sexual economy, physical, and verbal violence against women is such that the violation of women is a matter of right. Sexual assault and ill treatment of women are deemed a legitimate exercise in male privilege, orchestrated to punish, and bring shame to women. Sharon Marcus, in her essay, Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention (1992),<sup>7</sup> analyses rape as a script, in which one person takes the role of perpetrator and moves another into the complimentary role of victim. In developing a theoretical approach to rape prevention, she claims that the 'rape script' takes its form from a gendered grammar (rules and structure which assign people to positions within a script) of violence. The gendered grammar of violence predicates men as subjects of legitimate perpetrators of sexual violence and predicates women as the objects of violence and the subjects of fear.<sup>8</sup> The rendering of a

woman's body as victim and a man as perpetrator of violence against women is therefore socially constructed and is not permanent and can/should be studied, averted, and changed/transformed.

We therefore take courage and encouragement from the awareness created through, documentation, studies, film, drama, dance, art, through formation of networks, coalitions to protest and mobilize and galvanize communities and to bring public attention to cases of violence against women. Such awareness and public attention to the problem provides opportunity for deeper engagement with the issues raised and frames the discourse wisely and widely and the complexities that underlie female existence can be reflected upon in relation to the control and exercise of patriarchal power.

*Such expressive acts of response, analysis and reflection, require the rigorous, concerted and committed effort of women's dreaming and imagination, to breach the colonizing walls of patriarchy, of race, of caste, of sexism, of domesticity, of the church, of theological and religious intolerance of women.<sup>9</sup>*

Our resistance and response to the problem, bring to the fore the reality of violence against women, while at the same time shattering the marginality of women and weakening/breaching the

walls of patriarchy and the institutions that are moulded by it. Our attention to this issue, unravels and exposes concealed structures of a world and a church that too many have unfortunately taken for granted where women are subordinated, subjugated, and marginalized.

Our response, as church, as women and men of faith, is to wrestle with the terrifying logic and rationale of violence and offer a language that counters violence and bring to visibility and to our consciousness an alternative world that honors the bodies of women and men, of compassion, love, and justice. It is pertinent that we also partner with other organizations both religious (including non-Christian) and secular to address the issue.

There are therefore many ways to respond. I commend this effort on the part of the Creative Ministries Network Congregation. The beginning of the work to end the violence, oppression and marginalization of women and girls is for the church to be church!<sup>10</sup> Hence, first and foremost, we need to air this wound that ails our world, our country, our church, bring it out into the open. We need to be honest about its existence –acknowledge its existence, and name it, to begin the process of healing.

Unlike secular institutions that attend to sexual violence, we as church need to employ both a gendered and a theological approach/perspective to

<sup>6</sup> Nafiseh Ghafournia and Patricia Easteal, "Are Immigrant Women Visible in Australian Domestic Violence Reports that Potentially Influence Policy?" *Laws* 7, 32 (2018): 1. doi:10.3390/laws7040032

<sup>7</sup> <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D85B0BSG> Marcus, Fighting Bodies,

<sup>8</sup> *Fighting Words*, 392.

<sup>9</sup> Monica J Melanchthon, "Translating the Extravagance of Violence – Editorial" in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Volume 52:2, (Summer 2013): 85-87.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Gerhardt, 'Violence Against Women: Theological Reflection and Response,' <https://blog.nes.edu/violence-against-women-theological-reflection-and-response>.

view the world and identify the roots of violence hidden within our culture, our policies, our politics, our economy, our religions, our scriptures, our theologies and Traditions and our arts. Our analysis, considerations and strategies should arise out of our theological reflections. Re-reading and interpreting Scripture in community and from the perspective of women and the lived realities of women and men is a very significant and essential step in responding to the prophetic call to end violence. Our scriptures do provide insights of how we are to accompany victims and challenge structures and institutions that assist in the continuation of violence against women.

To respond as church community also requires a critical analysis of our theological traditions and confessions



and what they might teach us/or not about addressing violence and establishing respect, justice, and equality between genders. We need to always remind ourselves that violence against women is a sin, and when those who are victimized suffer, God does too. When women are dehumanized, the perpetrators are also dehumanized through inhuman behavior. Victimizing women is an offense against God as much as it is an offense against the humanity of women.

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## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY GUIDE

When Australian parliamentary staff member Brittany Higgins went public in February 2021 to report an alleged rape by a work colleague, it sparked a renewed focus on the shameful story of Australian men's violence against women. Brittany Higgins reported she took her own courage to speak publicly from the truth-telling witness of Grace Tame, 2021 Australian of the Year. Grace Tame had spoken out about her experience of being groomed and raped by her schoolteacher, and the way state laws silenced her from speaking out. Grace has dedicated herself to advocating for victims of sexual violence with a passion that was acknowledged when she received her award.

The impact of both women's courage, and the brutal betrayal and violence they suffered, struck a deep chord in our Creative Ministries Network Congregation. Congregation members wanted to talk about it. There was a sense of urgency that it needed to be talked about if we were to understand it better and thereby contribute to a more just Australia. But there was no clear sense of what 'it' was. Having named the topic as 'men's violence', it was quickly evident this touched deeply held emotions and some strongly held convictions, coupled with uncertainty and confusion about how to proceed. We felt the emotion evoked by the topic had the potential to be divisive without being very fruitful.

Three congregational gatherings were set aside to address this issue. We agreed our study needed to focus on making each gathering a safe space for honest conversations. Our second point of agreement was 'what is the question the congregation is asking?'

These three studies are for small mixed gender groups of up to 10 people meeting in person, or via Zoom. Leadership could be shared, or one person appointed. The leader may ask group members to share in reading aloud any part of the study. The leader could also pay attention to ensuring participants do not speak over others, silencing them, and encourage quieter members to contribute.

Each study takes about one and a half hours concluding with a prayer.

Using Biblical insights, personal reflection, listening without interruption to one another, and non-judgemental discussion, we explore how both men and women are affected by and might respond to cultural and social norms around men's violence in our own lives, and how deeper understandings and community support may contain seeds for change.

Margaret Neith and John Bottomley  
Creative Ministries Network  
August 2021

# STUDY ONE: GENDER FORMATION - PARENTS

## WELCOME:

We acknowledge the (insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

## OUR PERSONAL CONTEXT

*Women discuss in pairs:*

- What did you learn about your formation as a female from your mother?
- What did you learn about your formation as a female from your father?

*Men discuss in pairs:*

- What did you learn about your formation as a male from your mother?
- What did you learn about your formation as a male from your father?

*Members now share their response with the whole group, without interruption or comment.*

*Silent reflection:* What have you noticed about the seeds of men's violence from your paired conversation and the shared responses?

*Members share their response in the whole group.*

*When all who wish have shared their response, discuss together:*

- What insights or memories do we hold in common?
- What insights are unique to one or two, and which represent points of difference or tension?

Our text: Genesis 1: 26 – 31 (NRSV<sup>2</sup>)

There are two creation myths in the Book of Genesis. We will now look at a portion of the first of the creation myths from the Book of Genesis (1:1-2:4a). We will explore the second creation story (2:4b-3:24) in the next study. The two creation stories stand alongside each other, each with its own integrity. Here, the narrator tells how both male and female are made in the image of God.

*Choose two readers, a narrator, and God.*

Narr: Then God said,

God: 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

Narr: So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them,

God: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.'

Narr: And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

## COMMENTARY

(See Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978)

Trible uses "rhetorical criticism", a form of literary analysis, as a theoretical lens for interpreting the text, where the major clue to interpretation is the text itself.

Genesis 1:27 is 'the first scriptural clue for the subject of God and the rhetoric of sexuality'. It is part of a poem that moves in an orderly fashion from chaos (1:2 'the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep') to cosmic order. On the first three days of creation, God creates the skeleton of the universe, and on the next three days God fills it out.

Following the third day's creation of the earth appearing and vegetation growing, humankind appears on the sixth day along with the animals. On the sixth day, God speaks directly of God's intention, the narrator then reports God's creative act, and finally God speaks again directly, blessing and directing humankind to be fertile and have dominion. Humans and animals are blessed with food.

In this poetic version of the creation story, of all the creatures, only humans are made in the image of God, and only for them is sexuality designated as male and female. In this, humankind is made in the image of God.

What is to be noted about Trible's analysis of the text?

- The plural form ('created he them') reinforces sexual differentiation within the unity of humanity.
- The Hebrew word *ha-adam* (humankind) is not one single creature who is both male and

<sup>2</sup> NRSV: New Revised Standard Bible

<sup>3</sup> W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 30.

female but rather two creatures, one male and one female.

(let them have dominion: Let us make *adam* in our image).

- *ha-adam* is a singular pronoun, showing that male and female are not opposite but harmonious sexes. Unity embraces sexual differentiation.
- The poem ties *adam* to 'male and female', showing that sexual differentiation means equality, not hierarchy. They are created simultaneously, there is no superior or subordinate. Both have dominion equally (let them have dominion), and there is no assigning this responsibility based on differentiation between the sexes. Dominion is not envisaged as indulgent, self-serving freedom, but a mandate for humankind to be responsible for the care of the earth.

The poem distinguishes between 'God' and the 'image of God'; that is, the image of God as male and female is not the totality of how to describe God. More accurately, this poem points us to a characteristic of God's being, and emphasises a key theme of the Hebrew Scriptures, that the goodness of God's creation dispels chaos and brings life-enhancing order. Brueggemann adds that the 'elemental assertion of the equality of men and women is at the tap-root of the Bible<sup>3</sup>'.

## FORMATION?

*Reflect in silence for a minute or two on the following questions:*

What aspects of this text and commentary spoke most to you?

How does this Genesis poem's testimony to God's intention to create humankind male and female in the image of God compare and contrast to your own formation in your family of origin?

*Discuss your reflection on the questions in two mixed gender groups: 20 mins.*

*Let each group report back without interruption or comment first, followed by shared reflection on what has been said.*

*Then ask:*

What has emerged from the study to further your understanding of men's violence? Again, listen carefully to each person's contribution without interruption or comment, before introducing the closing prayer.

## CLOSING PRAYER

### Men

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you

are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement.

### Women

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

### All

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

### Women

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

### Men

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart.

*Psalm 51: selected verses*

### Women

Join us in solidarity with all victims of men's violence.

### Men

Accept us as we struggle to understand our part in this difficult problem.

### All

Recreate us in faith and love in your image to embody gender equality in our own lives.





## STUDY TWO: GENDER FORMATION – ADULT LIFE

### WELCOME:

*Members share their response.*

*When all who wish to have shared their response, discuss together:*

- What are the insights we hold in common?
- What are the insights that are unique to one or two, or which represent points of difference or tension?

Our text and commentary: Genesis 2: 4b – 3:24 (NRSV)

### REVIEW

Group members who took part in the first study are asked to recall at least one memory from the study that was important to them, and share with the study group.

### PERSONAL CONTEXT

*Women discuss in pairs*

What have you learned about your formation as a female from your adult life?

*Men discuss in pairs*

What did you learn about your formation as a male from your adult life?

*Members share their response without interruption or comment*

Silent reflection on shared responses. What have you noticed about the seeds of men's violence from your paired conversation and the shared responses?

This is the second of the two creation stories that begin the book of Genesis. Walter Brueggemann suggests that both Genesis creation stories need to be read as countering the creation myths of the surrounding nations, which typically justified violence against enemies on the basis that the created order was the result of a male warrior god, Marduk, who 'needed' to kill a female god who had threatened to kill Marduk's parents. In this Babylonian myth, creation is an act of necessary violence to restore order. By contrast, Israelite creation stories are artistic (i.e., poetic) attempts to provide an imaginative narrative for Israel's grounding as a different, more egalitarian and peaceful community in the midst of the older and threatening cultural claims of surrounding nations.

*Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.*

Phyllis Trible suggests the text comprises:

- An introduction (2:4b-7).
- Scene one: the development of Life (2: 7-24).
- Scene two: the turning point of disobedience (2:25-3:7).
- Scene three: the disintegration of life (3:8-24).

Trible's analysis dismantles centuries of misogynous reading of this text that have proclaimed male superiority and female inferiority as being the will of God. Given the CMN Congregation's commitment to study men's violence, it was very helpful to engage with Trible's feminist perspective and her method of rhetorical criticism to understand this text. She argues that the traditional views of male superiority and female inferiority are not supported by the story itself.

#### Introduction (2:4b-7)

*The text requires three readers, a narrator, the earth creature (*ha-adam*), and God. There is also a running commentary in a text box to be read by a fourth reader.*

Narr: The Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ... and there was no one to till the ground; ... then the Lord God formed man (*ha-adam* 'earth creature') from the dust of the ground (*ha-dama* 'earth').

The text is the NRSV translation, with Trible's translation in brackets. She says 'man' is not a good translation. The word 'man' for the first being is the poet's pun on the similar sounding word for 'earth'. God created the earth creature to serve the earth; that is, God's purpose for the earth creature is to till the earth. The creation of Life is a process, beginning with the creation of *ha-adam* 'earth creature'.

#### Life created: the development of Life (2: 7-24)

Narr. The Lord God formed man (*ha-adam* 'earth creature') from the dust of the ground (*ha-dama* 'earth'), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man (*ha-adam* 'earth creature') became a living being.

The earth creature is not identified sexually. It is not 'the first man'; rather the earth creature owes its life, place and purpose to God, to till and keep the garden, a pleasurable and loving work of dignity and integrity. God then gives the earth creature freedom for moral responsibility.

Narr. The Lord God commanded the man (*ha-adam*, 'earth creature'),

God: You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.

There are limits to human dominion. Nature has God-given independence and is bountiful.

God is concerned the earth creature has no corresponding creature of shared identity and determines to make a 'companion'. This word is often mistranslated 'helper', suggesting an assistant. But God's purpose is for a companion who is neither subordinate nor superior.

Narr. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man (*ha-adam*, 'earth creature'), and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man (*ha-adam*, 'earth creature'), he made into a woman (*issa*) and brought her to the man (*ha-adam*, 'earth creature'), Then the man (*ha-adam*, 'earth creature'), said:

*ha-adam* This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (*issa*), for out of Man (*is*) this one was taken.

Narr: Therefore a man (*is*) leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife (woman *issa*), and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Built of raw material from the earth creature itself, rather than from the earth - as have the plants, trees, animals and birds - the woman is unique in creation. From the time the woman is brought to the earth creature, the earth creature changes character. Utilising another pun, the earth creature calls the woman *issa*, and refers to itself for the first time by the specific word for man, *is*. The naming of "man" and "woman" is simultaneous, not sequential, and in

his poem, the man speaks of their unity, solidarity and equality. His sexual identity depends upon her even as hers depends upon him, and for both, originating in the one flesh of humanity. For both of them, Life originates from God, and woman is the culmination of creation, fulfilling humanity in sexuality.

#### Life contaminated: the turning point of disobedience (2:25-3:7)

Trible sums up what the episode with the serpent is about. It is not about evil, or a villain. Rather, it is about human obedience (Life) and human disobedience (Death) as defined by God. Eating from the forbidden tree offers, according to the serpent, knowledge that removes the limits of humanity and merges it with the divine. They ate, but the result is opposite to what the serpent promised: they now know their helplessness, insecurity and defenselessness. Life is now problematic, threatening. They attempt to cover-up their vulnerability.

#### Life condemned: the disintegration of life (3:8-24)

The two are brought before God in their nakedness to give an account of their actions. The man betrays the woman, then blames God and finally the man confesses. Although neither God nor the woman had tempted the man, he implicates them both in his guilt. The woman accepts responsibility only after blaming the serpent, but she doesn't blame God.

By betraying the woman to God, the man opposed himself to her; by ignoring him in her reply to God, the woman separates herself from the man. The couple are united in the brokenness of life. God then issues judgements against the serpent, woman and man. Trible asserts God's judgements 'are not commands for structuring life. To the contrary, they show how intolerable existence has become... These judgements describe consequence; they do not prescribe punishment ... They witness to living death, not to fulfilled life'.<sup>4</sup>

Narr: To the woman God said:

God: I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.

Narr: And to the man God said,

God: Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

The woman's suffering or toil in childbirth has a close parallel with the man suffering the lifetime toil of work. The second part of the judgement upon the woman emphasises the disintegration of her union with the man. While the woman yearns for the original unity of male and female, it will not be. Now there is a hierarchy of division. Both male and female identity are corrupted by their shared disobedience. The man's work will be alienated labour of toil and pain. God's description of their patriarchal relationship reveals patriarchy as the consequence of their shared disobedience against God's good creation. What is described is not prescribed as punishment, but as consequences

The story ends with God making clothes for both of them (3:21). While they retain their equality under God, after being disobedient to God they do not know how to live in mutual equality. More than that, the ultimate consequence revealed to the man is disintegration and death: 'dust to dust'.

## FORMATION?

What aspects of this text and commentary spoke most to you:

- In relation to our earlier discussion about gender identity?

- About what it discloses of hierarchical power in gender relations, conflict and men's violence?

- About how this ancient Hebrew myth frames the consequence of human disobedience to God's created order of sexual equality and mutuality as death-dealing self-aggrandisement and violence?

Discuss your reflection on the questions in two mixed gender groups: 20 mins.

Let each group report back without interruption or comment first, followed by shared reflection on what has been said.

Conclude by asking group members to state what has emerged from the study to further your understanding of men's violence. Again, listen carefully to each person's contribution without interruption or comment, before introducing the closing prayer.

## CLOSING PRAYER

### Men

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.<sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.<sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.<sup>4</sup> Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement.

### Women

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.<sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

### All

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

### Women

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

### Men

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart.

*Psalm 51: selected verses.*

### Women

Join us in solidarity with all victims of men's violence.

### Men

Accept us as we struggle to understand our part in this difficult problem.

### All

Recreate us in faith and love in your image to embody gender equality in our own lives.

<sup>4</sup> Trible, *God and the rhetoric of sexuality*. 123.



## STUDY THREE: VIOLENCE BEGETS VIOLENCE

### WELCOME:

We acknowledge the (insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

### REVIEW

Ask members who took part in the previous studies to recall any new insights they may have had since those studies that are important to them.

### BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

This study deals with the difficult topic of rape with reference to the story in Samuel 2 of the rape of young Tamar by her older brother Amnon. As well as being a story of lust and violence, deception, betrayal, and power all play a part. In a story that is over 2000 years old, some of these motivations, themes and behaviours still appear to be most relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1 and 2 Samuel narrate Israel's transition to monarchical governance, following on from their confederacy of tribes after the exodus from Egypt. Not everyone welcomed this transition, especially those who feared the centralisation of power that would come with a king. It is likely the reported events have historical roots, but the narrative is placed so it feeds into the following

books of Kings and Chronicles, which report the unravelling of kingship in Israel as the reason for the nation's later defeat by the Babylonians. So, the thread that runs through the books of Samuel report God's initiatives in guiding Israel's path and the terrible consequences of human lust for power and self-aggrandisement.

### A biblical story: 2 Samuel 13: 1 – 22 NRSV

*Choose readers to read the parts of the Narrator, King David, Amnon (the king's eldest) Tamar (Ammon's younger sister), Absalom (Amnon and Tamar's younger brother) and Jonadab (Amnon's cousin).*

Narr: Some time passed. David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. He said,

Jon: O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?

Amnon: I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister.

Jon.:Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, "Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand."

Narr: So Amnon lay down, and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king,

Amnon: Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand.

Narr: Then David sent home to Tamar, saying,

King: Go to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him.

Narr: So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. Then she took the pan and set them<sup>\*</sup> out before him, but he refused to eat.

Amnon: Send out everyone from me.

Narr: So everyone went out from him.

Amnon: (to Tamar) Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand.

Narr: So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her,

Amnon: Come, lie with me, my sister.

Tamar: No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you.

Narr: But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she was, he forced her and lay with her. Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her.

Amnon: (to Tamar) Get out!

Tamar: (to Amnon), No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me.

Narr: But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said,

Amnon: Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her.

Narr: Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times. So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her. But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went. Her brother Absalom said to her,

Abs: Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.

Narr: So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house. When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn. But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar.

#### Locating our experience in the story (20 minutes)

##### *Women discuss in pairs*

From this biblical narrative, are there aspects of this story that echo with your formation as a woman?

##### *Men discuss in pairs*

From this biblical narrative, are there aspects of this story that echo with your formation as a man?

##### *Members share their response in the wider group without interruption or comment.*

Silent reflection on shared responses: what have you noticed about the seeds of men's violence from your paired conversation and the shared responses?

*Members share their response in turn, first the women in the study group, then the men. When all who wish to have shared their response, discuss the following:*

- What are your insights that point to common ground,

or which represent points of difference or tension?

#### Our text and commentary

This commentary references Phyllis Trible's reading of the text (*Texts of Terror: literary-feminist readings of biblical narratives*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

#### The context: what happened before this story.

This text is bracketed by two stories of men's violence. The narrative beginning 'some time had passed' refers to time passing since King David's seduction (or rape) of Bathsheba and the King's plot to have her soldier-husband killed in battle so that he could take Bathsheba as his wife and mother to the child he has fathered. These events sparked the prophet Nathan's judgement 'Now therefore the sword shall never leave your house, for you have despised me (your God) ... Thus says the Lord, "I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house"' (2 Sam.12:10-11).

#### The context: what happened after the story.

When the Tamar story concludes, the biblical narrator reports 'after two full years' (13:23), Absalom organised a party for his brothers, and when Amnon was drunk, had him killed (13:29). Later, when Absalom married, he had three sons and a daughter he named Tamar (14:27), 'a living memorial for his sister'. Absalom stands apart from the other male characters in

relation to his care for Tamar, but is nevertheless captive to the trajectory of violence at the heart of national politics.

#### Commentary on what happens within the story.

Amnon is assisted by his cousin Jonadab, who is 'crafty' and has public ranking as the king's nephew. The story emphasises Tamar's aloneness, and her status as an object in Amnon's eyes. He never addresses Tamar by name when he speaks to her – she is 'my sister' and so depersonalised. As Absalom is Tamar's younger brother, it is Jonadab's plan to insert the king between the two brothers so as to get the king on side with feeding the lust of the older Amnon.

The narrative portrays Tamar as calm in the face of threat. She claims her voice to speak wisdom to Amnon at every turn, reminding him his actions will bring down public opprobrium on them both (13:12), and will mark him as foolish (13:13). She even offers him an alternative that would be publicly acceptable if authorised by the king (13:13). But her words fall on deaf ears (13:14a). Ammon refuses to listen, and forces himself on Tamar with his greater strength, raping her.

The narrated aftermath declares five truths:

- It was lust not love that motivated Amnon.

- After his lust is fulfilled, Amnon's hatred – his misogyny – is fully revealed.
- Tamar declares that the rapist's intent to cover up his violence is 'a greater evil' than the rape itself. 'Rape dismissed is crime exacerbated' ... 'a lifelong sentence of desolation'. Tamar has become in Amnon's eyes a 'thing' to be disposed of.
- Tamar's public lament draws attention to the injustice she is suffering and fulfils her prediction about Amnon; he is exposed as 'a fool in Israel' (13:13a).
- The adulterer king supports the rapist son (13:21): violence supports violence, and patriarchy denies justice for the violated female.

Who will keep women safe in such a society? 'In answering the question, Israel is found wanting - and so are we.'<sup>5</sup>

#### Men's violence: what is the question?

What aspects of this commentary echoed most with your lived experience?

- About how men's violence is normalised?
- About how women's wisdom is ignored?

- Of being found wanting in responding to men's violence.

*Two mixed genders groups: 20 mins.*

*Let each group report back without interruption or comment first, followed by shared reflection on what has been said.*

*Then reflect in silence for a time, share insights and finally discuss together: Can we discern the key issue for our personal and congregation's response to men's violence against women?*

Record any points of agreement, ideas for future advocacy or support, and/or questions for further study.

#### CLOSING PRAYER

*There are two readers, voice 1 and voice 2. All read the bold type together.*

V1: Lord, there is a time for mercy, and there is a time for justice!

V2: In mercy and justice be our strength on whom we lean, help us to create an atmosphere of trust which allows the unspeakable to be said.

V1: We ask the Risen Lord to continue to walk with and protect those who are burdened  
We pray: **Walk with them, Lord** –

V2: For all who have lost hope  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V1: For all who suffer  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V2.: For all who are sick and in pain  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V1: For all who are struggling  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V2: For all who have been badly hurt in life  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V1: For all who are grieving  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V2: For all who are depressed  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V1: For all who feel rejected  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V2: For all who feel unloved  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V1: For all who are oppressed  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V2: For all who are anxious  
**Walk with them, Lord**

V1: Help us to live with our painful memories.

**May we support each other and be safe places for each other. Through Christ, our Lord.**

(Adapted from Day of Prayer for Survivors and Victims of sexual abuse | Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference)

<sup>5</sup> P. Trible, *Texts of Terror: literary-feminist readings of biblical narratives*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 57.

## **MEMBERS COMMENTS ON THIS STUDY**

### What benefit did you gain by taking part in this study?

I found it very revealing that studying Bible creation myths and Biblical depictions of male violence can help shed light on contemporary issues and personal experiences of male violence in our society and culture. To think that people who lived and wrote so long ago were experiencing similar problems and prejudices! It helped me to understand how difficult and entrenched these issues really are. These studies opened up a unique opportunity for the men and women in our small congregation to share their experiences and to understand one another better. (Marg)

I've gained an increased awareness in how males, including myself, often speak first in meetings and discussions. Also, how females, often younger ones, may not speak at all in a group discussion. This has helped me improve in the area of listening better to women's points of view. Certainly, still a "work in progress", though.

Our discussions have also helped me reflect on how my presence sometimes can be threatening to others, especially if I am angry about something.

Also, that as a male I share some responsibility for male violence at the wider community level. Also, about the tragedy that countries are still inclined to resort to war to resolve conflict and spend huge resources in this area. (Gary)

Reflecting on the Creation narratives and in particular, awareness of male and female being created in harmony rather than in difference. (Steve)

I became increasingly aware of how often we men talked over the women in the congregation during times of discussion. I learned I could encourage women members to participate by indicating to them when they had begun to speak that I wanted to hear them. I was disturbed to learn from the women's report how often they self-censored themselves to avoid conflict with men, and at the same time how easily the women identified this as a common experience in mixed gender groups. The silence of women in a discussion does not indicate their agreement! I appreciated hearing Phyllis Trible's commentary and the freshness and importance of the way she attended to women's voices in scripture. It sharpened my awareness of the underlying patriarchy of the culture in which scripture was written, and the ongoing tension in the text when patriarchy silences or ignores women's experience. (John)

### Based on your experience in the study group, what do you think is the question about men's violence our Congregation should study next? Why?

Perhaps one topic that our congregation might examine in future, is "war" and men's violence. For example, I have wondered whether having women fight (and kill) on the front lines of a war is "equal opportunity" or a step backwards towards women becoming

more like men in their attitudes and propensity towards violence to exert power and control over others? I would be interested in seeing what the Bible has to say about such matters. (Marg)

How in western culture male identity is learnt and shaped within families/ schools/ and workplaces etc and how the shaping of male identity may or may not lead to men's violence? Where, and how do young men or even adult men, find suitable mentors or role models in encouraging and support them in achieving and maintaining healthy relationships? (Steve)

We could make a commitment to include gender-specific break-out groups on a regular basis to provide safety for both women and men that encourages each group to share experiences that help us to understand the gendered nature of so much of our formation as women and men. One of

our groups also hinted at the sense of shame a number of us had about behaviours we either took, were part of, or witnessed as younger men, and which we had basically 'buried'. This early formation in learning to compartmentalise emotions that are uncomfortable has proven not to be a healthy way of being manly. (John)

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