

THE BIBLE DOESN'T TELL ME SO

WHY YOU DON'T HAVE TO
SUBMIT TO DOMESTIC ABUSE
AND COERCIVE CONTROL

HELEN PAYNTER

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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 989 2

First published 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Acknowledgements and dedication

One name appears on the front of this book, but don't be fooled – producing a book is a team sport, not a solo one, and this would never have appeared without the input, support, expertise and assistance of many individuals, for whom and to whom I am exceedingly thankful.

I am grateful to the expert staff at BRF, especially Olivia, Karen, Eley and Daniele, who believed in this book and have enthusiastically helped it to come to fruition. They are not just publishers of a manuscript; they are passionate advocates of what I am attempting to achieve here – so much so that at the height of the Covid-19 crisis they actively sought out the extra work of pre-releasing a chapter with a view to helping women who were locked in with an abuser. Thank you all, it has been a delight to work with you once again.

The work certainly wouldn't have been completed without the enthusiastic support of my family. Much of it was written in the early mornings of our 2019 summer holiday, and my husband's first actions on waking each day were to seize upon and read the new chapter. I am ever grateful for his sharp eye on my writing; his is always my first and most loving editor's pen.

I am, in fact, acutely thankful for the two principal men in my life – my husband Stephen and my father Bruce – for being the epitome of non-violent, non-abusive, non-toxic men. I have known nothing but support and love from you both, and I thank God for you. Nor can I fail to mention the wonderful women in my life who have loved and supported me: my much-missed mother Eleanor, who would have been so proud to see this book published, and the feisty, determined and compassionate women that I am privileged to call my daughters, Susanna, Louisa and Victoria. May you always know your value and

dignity and may you be blessed with partners who honour and love you as Christ loves the church.

I'm also hugely grateful to those who read the manuscript at various stages in its preparation: Katy Adams, Natalie Collins, Kym Hildyard, David Batchelor and F. Each of you brought your own experience, perspective and expertise to bear upon it. The book is much the better for your comments and suggestions.

Most of all, this book could not have been written without the many women, survivors of domestic abuse, who spoke with me as I prepared to write. I am grateful beyond words for your willingness to relive and share painful and private memories, and for entrusting me with your stories. I have been moved and humbled by your courage, your tenacity, your love and your faith. I contemplated trying to name you all using initials only, but I feared forgetting someone. (Some of the 'interviews' were spontaneous conversations in churches and coffee shops.) But then I remembered the book of Lamentations, much of which is written in the voice of an abused woman. Each chapter is structured as an acrostic, with a verse for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is as if the woman is saying, 'This is the A to Z of my pain – let nothing be omitted.' So here is the A to Z of my gratitude. You know who you are. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. This book is for you.

Written in worship of the Lord Jesus, the ultimate non-toxic man, and the only truly complete human.

Preface

We start with a story from a very long time ago.

A downtrodden woman from an abusive domestic situation sees – beyond all hope – the fulfilment of her heart’s desire. Something she has longed for and prayed for over a very long time has come about. In response, she begins singing a song of worship.

My heart rejoices in the Lord...
 My mouth boasts over my enemies,
 for I delight in your deliverance.

But then her song takes a surprising turn. First she addresses her erstwhile abuser:

Do not keep talking so proudly
 or let your mouth speak such arrogance,
 for the Lord is a God who knows,
 and by him deeds are weighed.

Then she turns her attention more widely. Everything is being turned on its head:

The bows of the warriors are broken,
 but those who stumbled are armed with strength.
 Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
 but those who were hungry are hungry no more.
 She who was barren has borne seven children,
 but she who has had many sons pines away.
 The Lord brings death and makes alive;
 he brings down to the grave and raises up.

The Lord sends poverty and wealth;
 he humbles and he exalts.
 He raises the poor from the dust
 and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
 he seats them with princes
 and makes them inherit a throne of honour.

How can she speak so boldly about these great themes of reversal?
 Because she knows the character and power of God.

For the foundations of the earth are the Lord's;
 on them he has set the world...
 It is not by strength that one prevails;
 those who oppose the Lord will be broken.
 The Most High will thunder from heaven;
 the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

1 SAMUEL 2:1-10

You may recognise the song and be familiar with the story behind it. The woman is Hannah, one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. The abuse she has been subjected to is the mockery and disdain of the other wife, because Hannah was childless.

You could describe this story as one of the hinges of the Bible. Hannah is singing because she has had a son. The son is Samuel, and he is going to change world history.

* * *

The Bible has another hinge, even more significant than the birth of Samuel the kingmaker. It, too, is heralded by a childless woman – in fact, two childless women – giving birth. And Mary (for the two women are Mary, mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist) sings for wonder and joy, just as Hannah did. In a resounding echo of Hannah's song from so many generations before, Mary anticipates a great reversal for rich and poor, proud and humble.

My soul glorifies the Lord...
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
 thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
 but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
 but has sent the rich away empty.

LUKE 1:46, 51-53

When I was preparing to write this book, I had a striking conversation with someone who had been subjected to abuse by a church leader. She made reference to a blog post I had written, where I had used the phrase 'reading the Bible to hear the voice of God'.

'It was wonderful to read those words,' she told me, 'because for so long, whenever I have opened my Bible, all I have been able to hear is the voice of my abuser.'

And this is why I begin with Hannah and Mary, with these two brave women who found their place in the great plans of God. These are strong women who formed the turning points of the biblical narrative. These are prophetic women, who could see with the eyes of faith the plan the Father is working on: the elevation of the downtrodden and the toppling of the mighty.

Was it Mary who first taught Jesus the words of Isaiah the prophet? For it is just this theme that Jesus chooses when he makes his great pronouncement in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
 because he has anointed me
 to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
 and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

LUKE 4:18-19

And just a little while later, in his famous sermon on the plain, he emphasises the same thing:

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh...
But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.
Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.

LUKE 6:20-26

* * *

The Bible does not belong to abusers. And though you may hear echoes of their voices there occasionally, they are only found there to be contradicted, subverted and humbled.

The Bible was written for people like you.

Introduction

In February 2019, I received an email from someone I had never met. We'll call her Jenny. Jenny had heard me speaking on a series of podcasts produced by Bible Society, talking about some of the stories of sexually violent men in the Old Testament.¹ As a result, she contacted me to tell me something of her story and to ask me some questions.

Jenny has been married for decades to a man who for a long time served as a lay preacher with a major denomination in the UK. During their marriage he consistently emotionally abused her, undermining her confidence and self-worth. He also physically abused her, sexually abused her and raped her.

Jenny is now living apart from her husband, although they are still married. She is gradually healing, in body and soul. But she had some major questions, and many of these centred around what the Bible says to people like her. With her permission I quote from her email:

I would like to understand what happened. How could a Christian marriage end like this?

What does God think of it?

What was the church doing?

I know the Bible very well – we read a chapter aloud each night for 38 years, so I know all the hard parts.

I know that Hagar escaped and God sent her back. Why?

I know that the Levite abandoned his concubine to save a man and she died at the hands of men. Who cares?

I know it says wives should keep silent in church and ask their husbands at home. Huh!

If you can make any sense of all this and help the churches to do so, I shall be glad.

The issue for Jenny was particularly acute because for her, married to a preacher, scripture had been interpreted to her *by her husband* for decades. He had told her many times that Esther was an exemplary wife, a model of beauty and availability. Each time he said it, it made her feel more unattractive, more ashamed. He told her, again and again, that her role as a wife was to obey him. When she didn't, she was being a terrible wife. Or so he said.

Jenny knew her Bible well, but because of the way her husband had interpreted it to her, she could now only find in it themes which appeared to validate his treatment of her. Scripture had been *weaponised* against her. It had been shaped into something that could only hurt, not heal.

* * *

Jenny's email arrived in my inbox at just the right moment. As founding director of the brand-new Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence at Bristol Baptist College, I had been starting to think about the ways that the Bible speaks into situations of modern violence. I had also been starting to investigate ways in which the Bible is being used to endorse violence. When Jenny's message arrived, we began an email correspondence and then met in person. She helped me to see that there would be value in a book that debunks some of the dreadful ways that the Bible has been used by abusers. I hope I helped her to see that the use of the Bible in this way is an appalling distortion of God's word.

Since then I have done a lot of research, speaking with survivors of domestic abuse and coercive control, and also with those who work with them, through personal friendship or in a professional capacity. I offer this book as the fruit of that research, brought into dialogue with my study of the scriptures.

* * *

At this stage we should probably offer a definition of domestic abuse and coercive control. As well as physical hurting and sexual coercion, abuse can take a number of other forms, including emotional manipulation, bullying and financial control. The UK government website has a helpful checklist, which I reproduce below.² Notice that your partner does not have to physically hurt you for your relationship to be abusive.

If you answer yes to any of the following questions, you might be in an abusive relationship.

Emotional abuse

Does your partner ever:

- belittle you, or put you down?
- blame you for the abuse or arguments?
- deny that abuse is happening, or play it down?
- isolate you from your family and friends?
- stop you going to college or work?
- make unreasonable demands for your attention?
- accuse you of flirting or having affairs?
- tell you what to wear, who to see, where to go and what to think?
- control your money, or not give you enough to buy food or other essential things?

Threats and intimidation

Does your partner ever:

- threaten to hurt or kill you?
- destroy things that belong to you?
- stand over you, invade your personal space?
- threaten to kill themselves or the children?
- read your emails, texts or letters?
- harass or follow you?

Physical abuse

The person abusing you may hurt you in a number of ways.

Does your partner ever:

- slap, hit or punch you?
- push or shove you?
- bite or kick you?
- burn you?
- choke you or hold you down?
- throw things?

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse can happen to anyone, whether they're male or female. Does your partner ever:

- touch you in a way you don't want to be touched?
- make unwanted sexual demands?
- hurt you during sex?
- pressure you to have unsafe sex – for example, not using a condom?
- pressure you to have sex?
- If your partner has sex with you when you don't want to, this is rape.

Have you ever felt afraid of your partner?

Have you ever changed your behaviour because you're afraid of what your partner might do?

* * *

It won't surprise readers of this book, I guess, that there are domestic abusers within church. But it does surprise many in the churches. In fact, rates of abuse perpetration within church are about the same as rates in the general population.³ It's just that it's often brushed under the carpet, overlooked or smoothed away. People put their 'church faces' on and pretend that all is well.

Churches ought to be safe places for people who are abused to come and find solace, help and restoration. Sadly, the situation is often the exact opposite, because the abuse of scripture to manipulate a woman into tolerating harm is not confined to abusers. Perhaps with the best of intentions and often in entirely well-meaning ways, churches sometimes use the Bible to make the situation *worse* for the woman, when she plucks up the courage finally to disclose her situation.

Women I have spoken with describe how the church has told them it is their duty to win their husbands back by their meekness and compliant spirit (using 1 Peter 3:1–2). Or that because their husband has not been sexually unfaithful, she has no biblical grounds for divorce (using Malachi 2:16 and Matthew 5:32). Or that it is their Christian duty to forgive (and that forgiveness means allowing him to continue to abuse her and any children they have).

As I say, often the people giving advice in this way are trying their best to live faithfully and to mend a marriage. But they are frequently doing more harm than good.

* * *

There is another way in which the Bible can be brought to play where someone is abusing their partner. This is where the culture of the church provides the right conditions for abusers to develop and flourish. When this happens, the abusers may not even need to use the Bible at home. The church culture already appears to support what they are doing.

I have heard stories like this as I have interviewed those who have been subjected to abuse by a partner. Representative quotations would be as follows:

- The church taught me a passive way of being a Christian woman.
- We were taught that women should be meek and stay in the background.
- There was no framework or mechanism that would enable me to complain or raise concerns.
- There was such an emphasis on sin and guilt that I felt continually dirty and ashamed.
- I knew that divorce wasn't an option. Once you've made your bed, you have to lie in it.
- I was groomed for abuse, and the church played a part in that grooming.

Let's just let that last quotation linger in our minds for a moment: 'I was groomed, and the church played a part in that.'

Of course, the church wasn't *trying* to do that. It wasn't *aiming* to set itself up in such a way that women felt crushed, worthless and useless. It wasn't *intending* to establish a culture of male dominance that would give an abuser permission to cause harm.

But that is what happened. That is what many of the women I spoke with have had to contend with. The Bible was used in a way that established a church culture of male dominance and female subservience. And women were groomed to endure abuse.

God forgive us.

* * *

The Bible can be made to say just about anything, if it is taken out of context. It can be made to say that the earth stands on pillars (1 Samuel 2:8, NRSV), that certain men should castrate themselves (Galatians 5:12) or that we need to fetch Paul's cloak and scrolls from Troas (2 Timothy 4:13). In actual fact, of course, it is saying none of

those things to us. Here we have examples of imagery, rhetoric and comments made about particular situations. We need to read carefully, to think about what the writer is saying in the larger context and to piece together what that means for us.

A good minister will help train their congregation to do this well. She or he will encourage their congregation to learn to interpret scripture for themselves, while always valuing the insight of those who have studied the Bible long and hard. Sadly, and for a variety of reasons, people in the churches are sometimes not equipped to handle the Bible well.

And an abuser will not open up interpretive possibilities. He will shut them down. He will not invite discussion about context and interpretation. He will tell you what the Bible means and use it to beat you with. He may genuinely believe what he is saying, or he may be deliberately manipulating it. But what he is doing is using the Bible to control, to oppress, to harm. He is weaponising the Bible.

But the Bible does not support the abuse of anyone. It can only appear to do so if it is manipulated and twisted.

* * *

So what I am writing here is the book I wish Jenny had had 20 years ago. It is for all the Jennies who are still out there, being told that the Bible says they must tolerate the intolerable.

As I write this book, I have four types of reader in mind.

First, I am writing to women who are being subjected to domestic abuse or coercive control within a Christian setting, and who have scripture weaponised against them by the abuser or by their church. We are going to take a good hard look at the passages that abusers and churches use and investigate whether or not the Bible really is telling you that you have to endure your abuse. Spoiler alert – it isn't!

What I'm not suggesting is that you take any of the things we look at and use them to contradict your abuser. Often this will be unsafe. Only you can decide whether that is likely to be helpful or to put you at risk of further harm.

The person I most want to persuade is *you*.

There are many things arrayed against you, as someone with an abusive husband. He has probably whittled away your self-worth and self-confidence. He may have threatened to take your children away or hurt you. You may be concerned about the financial implications of leaving. You may be feeling a sense of guilt and shame (we'll talk about this in chapter 8). You may have tried to tell friends, or your minister, and found they have ignored or disbelieved you.

You may also be feeling confused and conflicted. Perhaps you are wondering why things are so difficult. Perhaps you are wondering if it is somehow your fault. Maybe you aren't even sure if what you are experiencing really amounts to abuse.

I'm sorry that there are so many things stacked up to make it hard for you to find safety and freedom. But please know this: the Bible is not one of them. The Bible is on *your* side.

It is my fervent hope and prayer that you will read this book and find it helpful. But first, **make sure you're safe**. Is it safe to take this book to your house? Do you need to disguise it somehow? Do you need to leave it in the home of a trusted friend? Don't let reading it put you in danger.

* * *

Second, I am writing to people who are supporting women being abused. You might be friends with someone who needs to read this book. It may be that she isn't ready to read it yet, but you might be able to discuss the ideas with her.

This won't be the only book you need to help your friend effectively. It's not a how-to guide for those who are supporting women in abusive situations. There are some excellent books like that around, and I suggest some of these at the end.

What's distinctive about this book is that it is intended to help your friend understand that God is on her side. That God is not – whatever she may have been told – demanding that she put up with it. That it is fine to leave her partner – to divorce him, even. That she should prioritise her own safety and the safety of any children involved.

* * *

Third, I'm writing to church leaders.

Friends, I'm a local church minister myself. I know that you have many calls on your time and many priorities. I wish I didn't have to press another one on you.

But domestic abuse and coercive control are common in churches. If you have a congregation above about 30 people, then it is more likely than not that someone in your church is experiencing it.

That means they are experiencing, or are at risk of, misery, suffering, danger and long-term trauma.

Tragically, churches have sometimes been complicit in abuse. They have made it harder for women to get out of abusive marriages. They have tried to fix things that are beyond their expertise and deal with matters that should have been referred to the police.

You and I might differ on some things. You might be the leader of a church that has traditional gender roles; I'm a female minister. But even if we do disagree on this, I believe this book is important, and I urge you to take it seriously, because I take the Bible very seriously indeed. Whatever our beliefs about women's roles in church, I'm sure

we agree that they should *never* be subject to abuse in the home. I will speak to you directly in chapter 11 and try to offer some final comments about using the Bible to build churches that are supportive of those who have been subjected to abuse.

So, church leaders, please read this book. Please make sure that you and your church are equipped to be part of the answer, not part of the problem. Please seek justice for those in your congregation, just as you do for those charities that your church supports. It is surely a core outworking of the gospel.

* * *

And finally, it is just possible that some abusers will choose to read the book. If that is you – welcome! I will address you directly in chapter 12, but please don't skip over chapters 1 to 9.

* * *

Many readers will already have noticed the gendered language that I am using here and will continue to use throughout the book. Let me explain why I have made this decision.

In the UK, cis and trans men and women are subjected to domestic abuse. Abuse is perpetrated in heterosexual and gay and lesbian relationships. I understand this. Nonetheless, the vast majority of abusers are male, and the vast majority of people who report abuse are female. The most up-to-date statistics from the Crown Prosecution Service show this:

2018–19 UK domestic abuse prosecution statistics

- 78,624 defendants were prosecuted. 92% of them were male.
- 81,035 complainants were recorded. Where the sex of the complainant was recorded, 82.5% of them were female.

CPS Violence against Women and Girls Report 2018–19, p. A13

And if we consider coercive control, which has been a criminal offence in the UK since 29 December 2015, this is almost exclusively a male against female crime.⁴ 17,069 offences of coercive control were recorded in the year ending March 2018.⁵

But this alone would not justify my using female language for victims and male language for perpetrators. My reason for doing so is because I am specifically addressing *the use of the Bible* in situations of domestic abuse. And, as far as I can tell, the Bible is being used by husbands who abuse wives, not the other way around.

Likewise, I have chosen to use the language of husband and wife rather than partner, even though I am aware that domestic abuse is perpetrated within civil partnerships, cohabiting relationships and other forms of domestic set-up. My reason, again, is because in households where the Bible is viewed as authoritative, couples are usually heterosexual and married. I realise that this is a generalisation, so forgive me if you are an exception to this. I don't intend to exclude anyone.

One final comment about the language I have chosen to use. I understand that many people object to the language of 'victim', and I have tried to minimise it in favour of 'survivor' or some other expression. Sometimes, though, the 'victim' word is really the only one that will do. So, I honour those of you who have come out of the abuse strong and whole; I don't know how you have managed it, and it moves me every time I hear such a story. And I also honour those of you who continue to live with brokenness, within a relationship or outside it. I do not seek to victimise you, but it is important to acknowledge that what has been done to you is utterly, utterly wrong.

* * *

So let me finish this introductory chapter by explaining how the rest of the book is structured. It is split into three parts. In the first part, we will consider some of the falsehoods – misunderstandings and outright lies – that are used by abusers or churches to prevent women from getting free from the abuser. I group these together under the broad title ‘The weaponisation of scripture’. We will look at each one in turn and seek to understand it properly.

Then we will look at some more positive things that the Bible has to say to women and victims of violence. I find it interesting that in the days of American slavery, the masters were pretty careful about which passages they allowed their slaves to read. What are the passages that the abuser doesn’t want you to read? Let’s crack them open and let the light flood out!

And then, third, I have three chapters that directly address three of the types of people who might be reading the book. As I have said, it is mainly aimed at women whose husbands are currently abusing them – or who were previously subjected to abuse. I will therefore conclude my message to you in chapter 10 by providing some possible ways forward. I will point you to other things you might read and signpost you to people who are willing to listen and help you. Chapter 11 addresses church leaders, and chapter 12 any perpetrators who are reading this book.

* * *

Let me say, finally, that as a minister and a teacher of the Bible, I take the responsibility of the interpretation of the Bible very seriously. I do not believe that we can twist it and bend it to suit our purpose. Nor can we throw out the bits we don’t like. So in this book we will look carefully, honestly and thoughtfully at the texts that have caused problems. But you won’t hear me say that the Bible is a terrible, patriarchal, abusive thing. I love the Bible and believe it is God’s word. I also believe that it is liberating. Let’s explore how.

Notes

- 1 The #SheToo podcast series can be found at biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/shetoo.
- 2 gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-recognise-the-signs/domestic-abuse-recognise-the-signs#how-to-recognise-domestic-abuse-in-a-relationship
- 3 See, for example, Leonie Westenberg, “When she calls for help”: domestic violence in Christian families’, *Social Sciences* 6:3 (2017), p. 71.
- 4 A. Myhill, ‘Measuring coercive control: what can we learn from national population surveys?’ *Violence Against Women*, 21:3 (2015), pp. 355–75.
- 5 ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2018



Enabling all ages to grow in faith



Anna Chaplaincy
Living Faith
Messy Church
Parenting for Faith

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches. Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

To find out more about our ministries, visit

brf.org.uk

This book is addressed directly to women experiencing domestic abuse, and to those who seek to support them, including pastoral leaders, friends and support organisations.

It debunks the myths – perpetuated by some abusers and, unwittingly, by many churches – which prevent women from getting out of harm's way. It helps them realise that the Bible does not belong to their abuser but is a text of liberation. Written with careful attention to pastoral issues, it closely examines and clearly explains the relevant scriptural texts.

'Extremely helpful, both for Christians who have been subjected to abuse and for those wanting a strong biblical approach to addressing domestic abuse issues. I know it will make a positive difference to women's lives!'

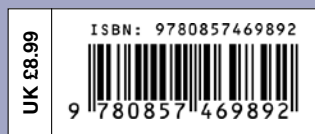
Natalie Collins, author of *Out of Control*

'Thorough and profound... I pray *The Bible Doesn't Tell Me So* will become a core text for leaders as they learn to recognise and respond to domestic abuse within their churches.'

Bekah Legg, director of Restored



Helen Paynter is director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence. A Baptist minister and biblical specialist, she has published at popular and scholarly levels. She speaks nationally and internationally about the interpretation of biblical violence and the abuse of the Bible to promote violence.



Cover photo by Alison Beek

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