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'Forget your people and your father's house' (Ps 45:11): The Hebrew Bible, marriage rites and spousal abuse in contemporary Ghana

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Spousal abuse is one of the foremost threats to peaceful coexistence in families the world over. In Ghana, stakeholders, particularly Christian leaders, have raised concerns about the increasing violence associated with spousal abuse, which sometimes results in the death of victims. Although both men and women suffer abuse in marriages, those meted out to women are prevalent. While substantial effort has been made by biblical scholars to discuss these problems in the light of the New Testament teachings on marriage, a gap still remains on what light the Hebrew Bible could shed on these matters. This article, using the distinctive interest approach of African biblical hermeneutics, examines Psalm 45 as a text of Hebrew Poetry intended to accompany the marriage ritual. It argues that the portrayal of the bride and groom, and the admonitions offered in the psalm contain some of the same disturbing elements present in contemporary Ghanaian marriage celebrations, elements that engender spousal abuse. The article proposes both a theological and cultural review of these elements as a way of attenuating their combined negative effect on the marriage institution in contemporary Ghana.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This brings African biblical hermeneutics into dialogue with issues in gender studies, World Christianity, Pastoral Theology and the Exegesis of the Hebrew Psalter.

Keywords: African biblical hermeneutics; Ghana; Psalm 45; marriage rites; spousal abuse.

Introduction

Spousal abuse is a phenomenon both of historical and global dimensions. In Ghana, increasing media reports on the murder of spouses, particularly women, have drawn the attention of both the Church and academia to the problem. The Ghana Demographic and Health Survey (GDHS) report in 2022 indicates that two in every five (41.6%) women aged 15–49 years who have ever had an intimate partner have experienced at least one form of intimate partner violence (IPV), that is, emotional, physical or sexual violence. In all, 35.2% had experienced emotional violence at least once, 22.7% had experienced physical violence at least once, and 11.2% had experienced sexual violence at least once (Ghana Statistical Service 2024:357–363).

The reason for the soaring figures has been sought in various domains. Adinkrah observes how sexual jealousy and suspected infidelity are often the cause of violence in marriage (Adinkrah 2008:209–216; Adjei 2016:411). Cultural factors have also been blamed for the state of affairs. Adjei observes how normative discourses and practices provide tacit support for spousal violence in Ghana (Adjei 2015:1). Others have, however, sought to interrogate the interpretation or misinterpretation of some New Testament texts, particularly Paul's injunction to women to submit to their husbands (Eph 5:22), as contributing to the problem (Rordorf 1969:196). Such interpretations arise both within the context of the celebration of the marriage ritual, that is, during church wedding ceremonies, or even at contemporary traditional marriage celebrations, which today are often officiated by pastors, and in the pre-marital counselling sessions.

What perhaps has not been emphasised sufficiently is the contribution of Old Testament biblical texts especially the Hebrew Psalter, and the nuances that these texts bring to the discussion. We choose Psalm 45 as an example of a text which arguably presents a Hebrew marriage ritual. Our choice of the text is based on two reasons. Firstly, this text, as we shall seek to demonstrate describes the marriage ritual with deeply gendered categories. Secondly, the text intersects strongly with traditional Ghanaian worldviews about marriage. And thirdly, this text remains part of the Christian tradition of the marriage ritual. Our purpose would be to call attention to the need for a nuanced interpretation of biblical texts in the Ghanaian Christian experience as a means

to engage the complex world of spousal violence and abuse. The study will thus proceed in three main steps: A canonical exegetical study of Psalm 45; a discussion of the contemporary practice of marriage in relation to spousal abuse; and finally, the implications of reading Psalm 45 within the contemporary Ghanaian Christian context.

Methodological considerations: African biblical hermeneutics

The argument for rigorous scholarship in the interpretation of the Bible which also addresses the existential issues faced by African peoples on the continent and in the diaspora, is what led to the growth of what has come to be defined as African biblical hermeneutics (Gatti 2017:47). This was because of the admission that the prevailing Western ideo-theological and ecclesio-theological approaches to the study of the Bible were ill-equipped to transform the life of the African reader of the sacred text. While some scholars warn against an 'exaggerated emphasis' on the contextual dimension of African biblical hermeneutics, because of its potential of 'suffocating the Word' (Ossom-Batsa 2007:100), other scholars like Adamo have defended the methods adopted by African biblical scholars arguing that there is no such thing as a hundred per cent objectivity, and anyone who interprets 'tends to bring his or her own bias to bear, consciously or unconsciously' to the text (Adamo 2015:33; Nsiah 2018:31–43).

Particularly relevant to this study are the contributions of scholars like Masenya (1997:439–448), who through her Bosadi approach to biblical interpretation has underscored the need for sensitivity to gender dynamics in the reading of scriptures. For this reason, she argues for women to embrace this book, that is, the Bible, 'as their treasure and use it for their liberation' (Masenya 1997:448). Similarly, Mtshiselwa (2016:8) takes the view that 'it is indeed possible to read ancient texts in favour of the oppressed', thus advocating liberation hermeneutics as an approach which serves the needs of the African reader. These approaches represent important attempts to ensure that the reading of the biblical text goes beyond an exercise in literary or historical analysis and contributes positively to the transformation of the African continent (Mensah 2023:1–2).

The need to find epistemological pathways located within the African experience, for engaging the biblical text, is what undergirds our choice of this method. As Kubai (2023) puts it, 'no one enters his house through another person's door'. African biblical hermeneutics, particularly the Distinct Interest Approach (Adamo 2015:45), is suited for engaging both the religious and social dimensions of the problem of spousal abuse, by interrogating the biblical text, and bringing it into conversation with the existential reality of the Ghanaian context. This involves both conducting a structural and literary analysis of the Hebrew Psalter, as well as an exegesis of the Ghanaian social context in which the interpreters live and work.

Conceptualising spousal abuse

The UN defines spousal abuse, also known as 'intimate partner violence', as a pattern of 'behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner' (United Nations n.d.). While cases of men as victims of such abuse can be attested, the overwhelming majority of cases of abuse find women as the victims. The most enigmatic issue relating to this global health phenomenon is the reason why victims stay in such relationships. Several theories ranging from depression to personality disorders have been proposed to explain the phenomenon. Similarly, cultural values and ideological framing have been blamed for the inability of women to disengage from abusive relationships. Adjei and Mpiani argue that perpetrators construct husbands' conjugal authority over their wives in terms of 'prescriptive religious norms' (Adjei & Mpiani 2022:1). The result is that such religious narratives become complicit in the dehumanisation of women in such relationships and emerge as tools for gender discrimination in contemporary Ghanaian society.

Premarital admonitions and marriage rites in Psalm 45

Psalm 45 has widely been considered by commentators as a psalm composed for marriage (Gaster 1955:239; Postell 2019:146). Problems, however, arise with the conception of the king in the psalm. Proposals range from the identification of the king as a particular historical King of Israel, such as Ahab or even Solomon (Attard 2018:464), on the one hand, to any ordinary person on the other, based on Gaster's observation that the language of royalty was often ascribed to any bridal couple in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures (Gaster 1955:239).

Other scholars have raised other concerns in the psalm. These include problems related to the identity of the figure referred to as שגל in v. 10 (Blankesteijn 2022:4); and the problem of the near-divine characterisation of the King in the Psalm (Blankesteijn 2022:2). Meanwhile, early Church Fathers, such as Augustine and Jerome have read the psalm as an image of the spousal relationship between Christ and his Church (Hunter 2000:285). Our discussion here will focus on the gender-constructed relations between the spouse and his bride in the psalm.

The structure of Psalm 45

There appears to be quite a general consensus among scholars on the structure of Psalm 45 as being divided into two main strophes (vv. 2–10; 11–16), preceded by an introduction (v. 1) and a conclusion (vv. 17–18) (Blankesteijn 2022:9; DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson & Tanner 2014:loc. 403; Van der Lugt 2010:36). Slight variations however occur. Kraus (2003:493), for instance, argues for the beginning of the second strophe in v. 10, citing the beginning of the marriage ritual. Postell (2019:148) argues based on a movement of location from the battlefield (vv. 2–5) to the palace (vv. 6–16) as constituting the main strophes of the psalm.

There is however good reason to retain the division, vv. 2–10; 11–16. Strophe I (vv. 2–10) is morphologically marked by the repeated use of the 2nd masculine singular suffix. The sudden shift to the 2nd feminine singular suffix in vv. 11–15 is remarkable, with the masculine suffix only returning in the conclusion (vv. 17–18). This is also underlined by the repeated use of the 2nd feminine singular imperative in vv. 11–12 which does not appear in any other part of the psalm. This interplay between the address to the spouse king (vv. 2–10) and the daughter bride (vv. 11–16) results in a gendered structure of the Psalm, as illustrated in Table 1.

Psalm 45 is thus divided into two strophes. Strophe I (vv. 1–10) begins with the introduction (v. 1) and continues with the discourse on the spouse-king (vv. 2–10). Strophe II begins with the discourse on the daughter-bride (vv. 11–16) and ends with the conclusion (vv. 17–18).

Strophe I (vv. 2–10): The portrait of the spouse king [מלך]

Strophe I (vv. 2–10) sketches the portrait of the spouse king. Key to this portrait is the use of the term גבור to describe the spouse. The term is usually translated as hero. Kühlewein (1997:415) asserts that the term is used for a war hero or a person who is accomplished militarily (Jos 6:2; 10:7; 2 Sm 17:8; 2 Ki 24:16). It is also used for a person considered to be capable (1 Sm 9:1) or generally of good social standing. In Ps 112, it is used to refer to the wealthy but generous man (Kühlewein 1997:415). Kosmala (1975:374) emphasises that the term is neutrally nuanced and could equally refer to anyone who distinguishes himself in any way, whether as exceptional in drinking strong wine (Is 5:22) or in violence and wickedness (Ps 52:3–5; 120:2–4). The characterisation of the spouse as גבור is thus quite ambiguous.

The bellicose image of the spouse king is thus clear in Psalm 45. He bears a sword (v. 3); rides a steed (v. 4), shoots arrows (v. 5) and is victorious against his foes (v. 5). This bellicose image is juxtaposed with the image of a handsome-looking king (v. 2), an expression used to characterise the attractive young Joseph (Gn 39:6), the young David (1 Sm 16:12) and Absalom (2 Sm 14:25) (Postell 2019:149). His wealth is seen in his use of cosmetics such as myrrh, aloes and cassia (Can 4:14; Pr 7:17), and lives in a luxurious ivory palace amidst the playing of musical instruments while being attended by a harem of women (Blankesteijn 2022:4; Van der Lugt 2010:40). The spouse king is also a father of sons (v. 17), the founder of a dynasty and an ancestor whose name is not forgotten (Kraus 2003:493).

TABLE 1: Structure of Psalm 45.

Keywords	Strophes	Themes
מלך	Str. Ia (v. 1)	Introduction
	Str. Ib (vv. 2–10)	The spouse king
בת	Str. IIa (vv. 11–16)	The daughter bride
	Str. IIb (vv. 17–18)	Conclusion

Strophe IIa (vv. 11–16): The portrait of the daughter-bride

The characterisation of the daughter-bride is achieved in strophe II by reference to three concepts: her age or youth, her appearance and her agency. Firstly, Haag (1975:333–334) notes that the term בת [daughter] as used in the Hebrew Bible both refers to the female child (Gn 11:29; 19:8; Ex 3:5) or a young woman in the broad sense (Gn 24:13). The daughter was often esteemed to be of less value than the son (Job 1:2; 42:13). The father had the authority to dispose of her and in the case of marriage exacted a bride price for her (Gn 29:15–30). Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:283), however, point out that the primary emphasis of the term בת related more to the sense of her youth. This is further reinforced in verse 15 by the introduction of the term בתולה [virgin] which also bears the nuance of a young woman (Tsevat 1975:341).

Secondly, the concept used to characterise the daughter-bride is her physical appearance. Strophe II refers to her beauty as the focus of the king's desire (v. 14). The objectification of the young woman is further reinforced by the reference to her apparel and her coif.

Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, is the question of agency. The use of the passive, in the wedding cortege is noteworthy. In verse 14, she is decked by unnamed agents with all the garments and cosmetics; moreover, she is led [תובל] to the spouse. The bride's diminished agency at least raises questions about whether she engages the spouse willingly or out of duty to her family, given the string of imperatives in v. 11. Moreover, the use of the verb יבל in v. 15 poses further problems. Hoffner (1986:366) points out that the verb comprises a second semantic component, which involves the offering of gifts or tributes to a superior to obtain his favour. The mention of the gift [מנחה] brought by the people of Tyre mentioned in v. 13 thus raises questions about whether the bride is not considered a part of the tribute being offered to the king. Whether this is precisely the case or not, the language in the strophe suggests a certain offering of the daughter-bride as an offering which seeks to please her rich and powerful male spouse.

Gendered roles and premarital admonitions in Psalm 45

Two important pre-marital admonitions are given to the daughter-bride in Psalm 45. The first concerns the need for the bride to forget her father's house (v. 11) while the second requires her to 'pay homage to him' (v. 12b). The admonitions presuppose certain gender-structured relationships between the daughter-bride and her male counterparts are the next to be examined.

Forget your father's house (Ps 45:11)

The advice to forget her father's house needs to be understood within the patriarchal structures characteristic of the Hebrew

culture. The father maintained strict control over his unmarried daughter (Sir 7:24). This notwithstanding, Haag (1975:337) asserts that the daughter retained her own personal sphere, reflected in Rebekah's self-assurance (Gn 24:24). The relationship between father and daughter could be affectionate (Jdg 11:34–40), as the parable of the poor man and the ewe lamb expresses (2 Sm 12:3). The pre-marital admonition to forget the father's house thus signals a transfer of paternal authority to the spouse. The bride might no longer be answerable to her father, but she is now answerable to her husband (Nm 30:4,11).

'He is your Lord; pay homage to him' (Ps 45:12b)

The question of how to interpret Psalms 45:12b is one of those which divides scholars. Attard (2018:466) asserts, based on Psalms 44:24, that this reference is made to indicate that YHWH is the spouse being spoken of. Similarly, Postell (2019:154) suggests that the daughter as used in the Psalm is a metaphorical reference to Israel as a nation (Is 22:4; Jr 4:11) and is similar to other expressions such as 'daughter of Judah' (Lm 2:2), 'daughter of Edom' (Lm 4:21) or 'daughter of Egypt' (Jr 46:42), in which case the bride is admonished to submit to YHWH as her spouse.

Eissfeldt, however, demonstrates that the term אדון (Lord) is used 300 times in the Hebrew Bible in reference to an earthly lord with only 30 references to a divine lord (Eissfeldt 1974:61). The title is often given to kings (Jr 22:18; 34:5). The use of the expression to refer to a father (Gn 24:27) and to a husband (Gn 31:35) are both attested. The action required of the bride is to bow down (חוה) before her 'lord' spouse. Postell (2019:150) points out that this action of bowing down is reserved for YHWH in the Book of Psalms. Preuss (1980:251) shows, however, that the use of the verb extends to the realm of secular greeting, respect and honour. Thus, Ruth bows to Boaz (Rt 2:10) and Abigail to David (1 Sm 25:23,41) as a gesture of submission, in both cases to men who would eventually become their husbands. Thus, it remains entirely plausible that the admonition to the daughter-bride in Psalms 45:12 is a call for submission to her spouse-king.

Reading Psalm 45 in contemporary Ghana

The questions that arise in reading Psalm 45 resonate closely with both narratives relating to the process of preparing couples for marriage and the celebration of the marriage rite in contemporary Ghana. We therefore proceed first by examining some of the intersections between Psalm 45 and the celebration of the marriage ritual in contemporary Ghana.

Spousal abuse and the marriage ritual in Ghana

Contemporary Ghanaian marriage, whether Christian, Islamic or customary, is steeped in tradition. The marriage rite is the third of the five major rites of passage. Traditionally and even in contemporary times, young people, when they get to a certain age, are expected by society to settle down with either a wife or a husband, depending on their gender. This stage of life is not without its unique rituals that cement the union between the man and the woman. The problem though is that elements of these rituals, which have been accepted, especially into the Christian marriage ritual usage, continue to preserve elements that work in favour of the perpetuation of spousal abuse in Ghana. As a number of studies have shown, the Ghanaian, specifically the Akan indigenous cultural context itself engenders an atmosphere that promotes violence against women (Bowman 2003:473–491; Frost & Dodoo 2009:44–49, 2010:41–59; Horne, Dodoo & Dodoo 2013:503–529).

The bride price

One of the most significant dimensions of indigenous marriage rituals is the payment of the bride price by the man's family (Horne et al. 2013:503–529). This practice, even though it was originally obtained in traditional marriages, is now recognised by Christian churches, some of whom do not proceed with the Christian marriage rites until this requirement has been fulfilled and the bride's family is satisfied. In the Akan context, for example, the bride price is paid in exchange for the bride. It symbolises that the man has paid back the family, especially the girl's parents, all that they have invested in raising the young woman to a marital age. The bride price serves a dual purpose – once the bride's family accepts it, it signifies their acceptance of the man to marry their daughter and the bride's consent to the marriage. Also, whenever the bride initiates a divorce, the bride price must be returned to the man's family, and if accepted, symbolises the outright dissolution of the marriage despite any legal battles that may ensue afterwards between the husband and the wife.

Parallels have been drawn between the concept of the bride price in African Traditional Societies and the Old Testament. Nwaoru (2002:22) observes that in the Old Testament, the bride price was 'more far-reaching than a mere gratuitous offer made by the groom to the bride's father'. The value and form of the bride price were sometimes stipulated by law (Ex 22:15; Dt 22:28–29) or determined by the bride's father (Gn 34:12), the quality of the bride, the social status of the family (1 Sm 18:25) or the altruism of the groom (Gn 24:53) (Nwaoru 2002:24). Rashkow (2022:144) suggests that the function of the practice was to compensate for the loss to the bride's family upon her marriage. Thus, Nwaoru (2022:31) concludes that 'the idea of paying 'price' to acquire a bride is not foreign to the Africans'.

The concept of bride price, in recent times, has become an issue of contention among many scholars, some of which argue that its payment engenders abuse in marriages, often with women at the receiving end. Scholars like Sarpong (1974:83) have thus even advocated the use of the term, 'bride wealth', instead of 'bride price'. These scholars contend that the payment of the bride price is tantamount

to selling off the woman to the man, thereby making her one of the many properties or chattel the man acquires in the course of his life and, therefore, affords him the impetus to abuse the woman as and when he pleases. Other scholars disagree with this view, however, and opine that although the payment of the bride price could play a role to some extent, it cannot be blamed as the sole cause of spousal abuse in contemporary times, and that there may be several other issues at play, including temperament. Some have gone to the extent of positing that although it is the abuse of women in marriages that often gets a chunk of attention, there are many men also suffering abuse in their marriages.

What is clear is that the bride price remains a delicate traditional element in the Ghanaian Christian marriage ritual, albeit borrowed. Husbands continue to cite this practice as legitimising their sense of ownership of women. The mention of the gift [מנחה] in Psalms 45:13 within the context of a marriage procession thus re-evokes the question of the bride price. Admittedly in Psalms 45:12–13, the gift is brought to the bride not by the spouse-king but by 'the daughter of Tyre', a designation which could refer to a foreign nation (Attard 2018:470; Lancelotti 1984:35). Even still, the idea of the inducement of the bride, 'showered with gifts from those of wealth and influence' who seek her favour [פניך], underlines precisely the commodification of the woman (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:21). The elements of similarity between Psalm 45 and the African context can thus not be denied, and further show the importance of a nuanced interpretation of these texts in order not to aggravate an already problematic situation.

Royalty and display of wealth

In traditional Akan marriages, the emphasis is often on the nobility of the man (*Obarima nuonyamfo*); if the man happens to be rich (*odefo*), then it is considered a huge achievement, and many families often pride themselves in the fact that their daughters have managed to attract wealthy men to marry them. It sometimes creates competition between families and neighbours as to whose daughter would bring home a rich man who can boast of houses, cars and enough money to take care of the girl and her family. Oftentimes, the size of the bride price determines whether the potential husband is rich enough to cater for the needs of their daughter. If a man cannot afford an expensive bride price, then it suggests that he is not wealthy enough to marry their daughter. However, some studies, such as that of Ofori et al. (2019:1), have shown that the payment of the bride price in itself creates 'power imbalances', because after paying the bride price, the men feel that they have bought the women from their families and so can treat them as they please, including abuse. The bride price thus acts as a double-edged sword. Although it can prove how much a man cherishes his future bride, it can also serve as a tool for abuse.

The portrayal of the royal couple in Psalm 45 thus resonates particularly closely with the celebration of the marriage ritual in contemporary Ghana. The problem associated with this, unfortunately, is the inordinate desire to appear wealthy at these ceremonies, leading many men into huge amounts of debt. Indeed, deep disagreements between spouses are known to have developed precisely because of over-expenditure at the wedding, with the woman often taking the blame and suffering abuse for the family's eventual financial distress.

'He is your Lord': The admonition to submit

Another dimension of contemporary marriage is the admonition for complete submission to the husband as stated in Psalms 45 v. 11b and reiterated in Ephesians 5 v. 22. These Bible verses are the major influences of why women in some churches in Ghana are still taught to refer to their husbands as '*me wura*' [my Lord] and also treat him as such. One major perception in Ghanaian popular culture is the saying '*obaa anuonyam ne ne kunu*' [a woman's honour is her husband], and it has become a form of admonition that is still given to brides at marriage ceremonies presided over by clergymen. This perception underscores the idea that no matter how high a woman climbs on the social and economic ladder, she is not complete without a man. It is only when a woman marries that she is honoured. This also means that being married must be worn by women as a 'badge of honour'. However, a deeper meaning of this saying is to ensure that women submit to their husbands, or risk either divorce or their husbands marrying more wives. This is to be understood within the generally polygynist Ghanaian traditional context, in which society is largely tolerant of men having multiple wives while frowning on the reverse. A running theme in conversations with many married women these days, then, is that 'Marriage is to ensure the happiness of the man and not the wife'. Because the husband is the 'lord', he gets to laud it over his wife and she, in turn, has to submit.

The traditional practice of referring to the man as 'lord' or 'master' is seen also in Psalm 45. The 'daughters of kings' in v. 10a could be a reference to the royal harem underlining the permissibility of polygamous relationships (Blankesteijn 2022:4; Van der Lugt 2010:40). These present a real difficulty, especially when passages like these are presented within the context of pre-marital counselling as well as at Christian marriage ceremonies. A conscious effort is thus required to deconstruct such passages, without which the risk of deepening patriarchal structures in traditional society is further reinforced by biblical ones.

'Sons shall be yours': The dynamics of childbearing and parenthood

[3] Lo, sons are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. [4] Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of

> one's youth. [5] Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. (Ps 127:3–5, Revised Standard Version)

The emphasis on children at Christian marriage ceremonies in contemporary Ghana is evident, as the clergy do not tire of quoting the biblical scripture cited above. For example, the Roman Catholic Church's marriage ritual includes the petition for children in the nuptial blessing while Pentecostals and charismatics also pray almost without fail for 'the fruit of the womb'. Traditional society's views and expectations for childbirth are also never divorced from the contemporary Christian context. Indeed, some women, because of their inability to bear children within a few years after marriage, are either chased out of their marital homes, or other women are forced on their husbands, even if the inability stems from the man. Some families and members of the community can go as far as branding so-called barren women as 'witches who have eaten all the children in their wombs', although purely medical reasons could account for their inability to have children.

The supposed blessing in Psalms 45:16 almost wholly repeats this idea. The children are to make the spouse-king's name remembered. Nothing is said about the daughter-bride who is reduced to an instrument for childbirth. The task of reading Psalm 45 in contemporary Ghana is thus one of deliberately pointing out the risks of perpetuating those elements which could aggravate the problem of spousal abuse in marriage.

Recommendations

From the discussion earlier in this article, it has become evident that certain texts in the Bible, such as Psalm 45 inadvertently engender spousal abuse in contemporary Ghanaian Christian marriages. Masenya (1997) has cautioned against such warped interpretations of scripture noting quite poignantly that a woman, being created in the image of God, is fully human and:

> [*A*]s an independent person, she may choose to be involved with a male partner in a marriage relationship though that does not entail that she loses her humanness and independence to her male partner. (p. 442)

It is in light of these concerns that this study proposes three main recommendations that may help reduce, if not entirely stem the issue of spousal abuse in modern Ghanaian Christian marriages.

The first recommendation is the effective training for clergy, especially those who officiate marriage rituals as regards how to deal with so-called 'texts of terror' (Chaudhry, Muers & Rashkover 2009:198) in their pastoral ministry. The paradigm appears to have been provided in texts like Ephesians 5:2, where the author uses the concept of submission [ὑποτάσσω] 'in an effort to combat the reigning hierarchical social norms, employed a message that was not only counter-cultural but also a distinctly Christian perspective' (Armstrong 2017:169). Mutter (2018:20) equally argues that Ephesians 5 introduces a new narrative that 'transcends the limits of the old and introduces a distinctly new Christian vision of husband-wife relations that is not tied to the culturally dominant view of the husband-as-lord-and-master'. The careful application of texts such as these should contribute to a more balanced vision of marriage, allowing alternative voices in the biblical repertoire to be heard, and not exclusively those which serve patriarchal interests (Keown 2016:47–48). Similar training is recommended for marriage counsellors in order to arm them with the right tools and skill-set to effectively prepare couples for marriage. Finally, the article adds its voice to the call by many other scholars for the adoption of the term 'bride wealth', instead of 'bride price'. This is because while the latter creates a kind of 'power imbalance' between the husband and wife, which normally leads to abuse, the former is much more empowering. Instead of it being the 'price' paid as in the purchase of a property, it will rather symbolise wealth for the bride.

Conclusion

The problem of spousal abuse continues to be a challenge both in the Christian Church and in the wider society. While several factors have been identified as contributing to the problem, the interpretation of biblical texts remains a delicate element which could aggravate the problem, given the use of these texts both in premarital counselling sessions and in the marriage ritual. An examination of Psalm 45 reveals gendered dimensions both to the ritual and the admonitions given to the daughter-bride, which could reinforce traditional views of marriage unless deliberate exegetical and pastoral choices are made. It is recommended that these issues are incorporated into training programmes for pastors and church counsellors as a way of sensitising them and encouraging them to intervene and correct the uncritical use of these interpretations during Christian marriage celebrations.

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The research was led by M.K.M., who conceptualised the project, wrote the abstract, coordinated the project, and worked on the biblical exegetical portions. C.M.-W. contributed to the contextual study, extensively reviewing and editing the work. A.S. contributed to gathering literature, specifically on spousal abuse.

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