

# ABORTION AND THE BIBLE

a study presented to the Committee on Abortion  
of the Presbytery of the Dakotas

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As the Christian, seeking to respond to the movement to legalize abortion, turns to the Scriptures, he is struck by the lack of reference to abortion in the Word of God (except for one passage, Exodus 21:22-25). The silence on the subject seems to indicate that the practice was foreign to the culture of God's people.<sup>1</sup> What guidance do the Scriptures give? It is evident that the Christian's attitude towards abortion will be formed, not so much on the basis of a few texts, but rather on the whole attitude towards conception and birth contained in the Scriptures.

The approach of Scripture to the subject is vitally important. If induced abortion is unscriptural, the believer cannot argue for the practice on the basis of the right of every child to be loved, the right of a woman to control her own body, or the rights of other members of a family. If it can be shown that the clear assumption of Scripture is that the life of the unborn child is sacred, the problems raised by an increasing population and unwanted children will have to be solved in a manner which does not conflict with the revealed will of God. While believers ought to concern themselves with these matters, the primary task of the church, as church, is to set forth the Word of God. Thus this paper limits itself to the Scriptural attitude towards induced abortion.

One further note regarding approach. The question of the origin of the soul is mentioned only because it is so frequently discussed in connection with abortion. While the benefits of a traducian view as opposed to a creationist position might be debated, it appears to the present writer that this is a subject on which the Scriptures are silent. The profit of such speculation is minimal. The Scriptures view man as a unit, and that unity is broken only by death (and even then, only temporarily, until the resurrection).

Basic to a Biblical anthropology is man's creation in the image of God. This is stressed three times in the creation account in Genesis 1:26,27. It is man's character as an image of God that makes his life sacred. This is clearly set forth in Genesis 9:6. Because man is the image of God, the crime of murder is so terrible. It is the statement that man is God's image that distinguishes the penalty required here from other penalties in the Pentateuch.<sup>2</sup> The sin of taking the life of an image of God is to be punished by death. The state is to enforce this penalty, even in the New Testament (Romans 13; 1 Peter 2:13-17). The point we wish to stress is that life is sacred, not because of some "natural right," but because God made man in his own image.<sup>3</sup> Note that this applies to fallen, sinful man (Genesis 9).

The question, however, is whether a fetus can properly be spoken of as being in the image of God, and thus falling under the protection of the sanction against murder. It is the conten-

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdoony, Rousas J., "Abortion," *The Encyclopedia of Christianity, Vol. I* (Wilmington, Del., 1964), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Murray, John, *Principles of Conduct*, (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1957), pp. 112, 113.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, John J., "The Scriptures and Abortion," *The Presbyterian Guardian*, Vol. 39, No. 6, (November, 1970), p. 79.

tion of the present writer that the Scriptures do treat unborn children as images of God.

Genesis 5:1-3 recalls the language of the original creation of man in Genesis 1:26. Just as God created man in his own likeness, so Adam begets a son in his own likeness and image. The use of the two terms "image" and "likeness" in 5:3 serve to stress the parallel with the creation account.<sup>4</sup> These verses stand at the head of the first genealogy in Genesis. Just as Adam begat Seth in his image, the other descendants were begotten in the image of God. While this passage does not prove that the descendants were images of God before their birth, it does show a connection between the image of God and procreation.

The Rev. John J. Mitchell draws attention to the activity of God recorded in connection with conception:

Eve conceived the first child in history and then says of him, "I have gotten a man from the Lord" (Genesis 4:1). Isaac (Genesis 21:1, 2), Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:21), several of Jacob's sons (Genesis 29:31-35; 30:17; 30:22, 23), Samson (Judges 13:3, 5, 7), Obed (Ruth 4:13), and Samuel (I Samuel 1:19, 20) are all conceived as a result of God's intervention. In some cases it is in answer to prayer; in others it is the outworking of God's redemptive purposes. The climactic instances are the conceptions of John the Baptist (Luke 1:24) and Jesus himself (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:31:2:21).<sup>5</sup>

God himself is active in the conception of the people cited in the references above. The stress is on the direct activity of God. To view conception apart from the activity of God is to see it in a mechanistic and unscriptural manner.

Psalms 139:13-16 is of special interest. Not only does David use the first person singular when he refers to his prenatal existence, he seems to draw a deliberate parallel between his conception and the creation of man. His stress lies not merely on God's omniscience and omnipresence, but also on God's creative and forming activity. "Just as God was active in forming Adam, so he formed me," seems to be the supposition behind these verses. Delitzsch speaks of the repetition of the mode of Adam's creation as "the view of Scripture" and cites Job 1:21 and 33:6 for support.<sup>6</sup> At any rate, the stress on God's formative activity in this passage is beyond doubt.

Exodus 21:22-25 is sometimes cited as Scriptural support for the position that God does not regard the fetus as coming under the protection of the sixth commandment.<sup>7</sup> On the view that the harm spoken of refers simply to injury to the woman, there is merely a fine imposed for the loss of the fetus. It is arbitrary, however, to restrict the harm mentioned to the woman.<sup>8</sup> The term for the unborn child is *ēl* (*veled*), which is used elsewhere to refer to children. The more natural reading is to see the fine imposed only if there is no harm to either the mother or the prematurely born child; if either is harmed, the "eye for eye" law holds. Thus the unborn child is as firmly protected by the prohibition against murder as the mother is.

<sup>4</sup> At this point I am indebted to Prof. Murray for his exegesis of this passage in class.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, "The Scriptures and Abortion," p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Delitzsch, Franz, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms, Vol. III*, (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1968), p. 350.

<sup>7</sup> Waltke, Bruce K., "Old Testament Texts Bearing on the Problem of the Control of Human Reproduction," Spitzer, Walter O. and Saylor; Carlyle L. *Birth Control and the Christian*, (Wheaton, Ill., 1969), pp. 10, 11.

<sup>8</sup> See Keil, C. F., and Delitzsch, F., *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume II, The Pentateuch*, (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1968), pp. 134-5.

It may be argued that *āî é(yeled)* refers to a fetus only after it has a recognizable form. *î ôĀĒ(nephel)* is the term used to refer to the product of abortion, but even this term is not impersonal. In Job 3:16 it is used in parallel with a word which simply means "infant" and the context of Ecclesiastes 6:3, although pessimistic, is not impersonal. The usual verb used to refer to aborting in the Old Testament is *î ĕĀŃ(shakal)* in the Pi. or Hiph. (Exodus 23:26; Hoseah 9:14). However, the same verb is used to refer to the death of children after they have been born (1 Samuel 15:33; Leviticus 26:22; Hosea 9:12).

It is important to note that the Bible does not have a special vocabulary to distinguish the unborn infant from a child who has been born. Rather, the same terms are used for both. David can speak in the first person of his existence before birth, even of himself at the moment of conception (Psalm 51:5; 139:13-16). Jacob and Esau are "sons" (*î ĕĀĀ*) (*banyim*) before birth. Job is a *ôĀĀĀ(geber)* or man as soon as he is conceived. Jeremiah is a person before birth (Jeremiah 1:5). *#DXN@H(brephos)* can refer to John before his birth, just as it elsewhere refers to children (Luke 1:44). It might be argued that this is just the natural way of speaking. To be sure, it is the easiest way of expressing the idea of a person not yet born, but the fact remains that personal language is used to speak of unborn people, and impersonal language is not characteristic of the Scriptures that refer to this.

All of this evidence points in the direction of a very high view of the human fetus. Like people, unborn children, when they are spoken of, are seen as personal, as images of God, and as those whose life is to be protected. The question arises, if the Bible has such a high view of the fetus, why is there no specific prohibition of abortion? The answer is that God's revealed will that children are a blessing from the Lord, and the general acceptance of this attitude towards childbearing, made a specific prohibition superfluous. God not only commanded Adam and Noah to be fruitful and multiply, but he promised many descendants to the patriarchs. The God who promised to bless the people by preventing miscarriage (Exodus 23:26; Deuteronomy 7:14) would hardly expect his people to destroy the life with which he had blessed them. "Children are an heritage from the Lord" (Psalm 127:3). The New Testament believers, rooted in the Old Testament, seem to have had a similar attitude towards the birth of children. The early church soon spoke out against abortion.<sup>9</sup>

To summarize, although relatively few passages say much directly about abortion or the status of unborn children, the assumption of Scripture is that the fetus is a human being and an image of God. Thus the life of the fetus may not be taken without destroying someone who is the image of God.

Does this mean that abortion is never justified? Is it always murder? Just as the taking of life is not always murder, abortion is not always murder. But the same sanctions protect the fetus as protect any other person. As far as I can see, the only instance where abortion might be justified is a case where the unborn child threatens the life of the mother. As Prof. John M. Frame argues, a man would be justified in killing an attacker, if necessary, in order to protect his wife.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Rushdoony, "Abortion" pp. 20f.

<sup>10</sup> Frame, John M., "Abortion and the Christian," *The Presbyterian Guardian*, Vol. 39, No. 6, (November 1970), p.

If the mother's life is threatened by the fetus, an abortion might be justified to prevent the attack on the mother's life.

Finally, does the Christian have any right to impose this position on the rest of society by laws that restrict abortion? Some argue that he does not.<sup>11</sup> However, the view that the fetus is an image of God requires the believer to place the taking of this image on a ground with other acts of taking life. If the state has the responsibility of putting murderers to death because they have killed those who are images of God, it also has the responsibility of punishing those who perform abortions. Thus the believer has the obligation of seeking to see that the state fulfills its responsibilities before God in this area.

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**Note:** This paper, originally presented to the Presbytery of the Dakotas in March 1971, can also be found in the *Minutes of the thirty-ninth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, May 15 - May 20, 1972, pp. 23-26. The cultural situation in which we live has changed since this study was produced. Written today, it likely would have a different emphasis. The principles of the Word of God, however, remain unchanged. Transliteration of Hebrew and Greek words has been added.

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