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Abortion: Historical and Biblical Perspectives

John A. Rasmussen

In his *Republic* Plato stated that ill-conceived embryos should not be brought to light and that, if the children were born, the parents should dispose of them.¹ Aristotle likewise wrote that if any woman conceived a child as a result of an improper act of intercourse, abortion should be practiced before the fetus developed sensation and life.² In addition, Aristotle stated that no deformed child should be reared, but rather it should be exposed.³ Puny Spartan infants were taken to the wilderness of Mt. Taygetos and exposed because "it was neither good for the child itself nor in the public interest that it should be brought up if it did not from the outset promise to become healthy and vigorous."⁴

Abortion was, then, a familiar practice in the ancient Mediterranean world. One of the most learned of Greco-Roman gynecologists, Soranos of Ephesus (c. A.D. 98-138), discussed two main categories of abortion. Abortion was practiced through an abortifacient (*phythorion*), which would destroy what had been conceived, or through *ekbolion*, which would expel what had been conceived.⁵ Abortion, to be sure, was not accepted by all physicians of the day. Hippocrates, striving for a high standard of medical ethics, included this statement in his Oath: "I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion."⁶ Nevertheless, if a woman of Imperial Rome did not want her child and yet could not or would not arrange an abortion, she had another option. William Barclay says in his introductory thoughts on the New Testament that at the time of Christ an average of forty children a day were deserted in the forum at Rome. These children became gladiators in the games or prostitutes in the brothels of Rome.⁷

The Judaeo-Christian way of life, however, was diametrically opposed to this secular endorsement of abortion and infanticide. Philo of Alexandria, for instance, associated abortion, intentional as well as accidental, with infanticide and the abandonment of children; the Jewish philosopher considered such practices instances of inhumanity which were regarded "with complacency" by many nations.⁸ The Old Testament, after all, is very insistent on the sanctity of life. It is God Himself who said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air." "So God created man in His own

image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:26-27). According to this text, what distinguishes man from the animals and makes him a unique creature is that he is created in the image of God. It is in the image of a spiritual, moral God that man is created. In contrast to the animals, which behave instinctually or mechanistically, man is created as a moral being able to distinguish between right and wrong.⁹

The God of the Old Testament is a God of life who created man for life, not for death. Genesis 3:3 reads: "But God said, you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die." God wanted man to live. He also wanted the species continued and He gave man children. Thus, in the Old Testament children are consistently regarded, neither as a nuisance nor as a plague, but rather as a blessing to a man and his wife. Genesis 1:28 reads: "And God blessed them, and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it . . ." Life and children were of paramount importance to the people of God of the Old Testament era. Conversely, sterility was a cause of shame among the women of the Old Testament, as is seen in the accounts of Sarah; Rebekah, the wife of Isaac; and Rachel, the wife of Jacob. He who fears the Lord and follows his paths is promised a wife like a fruitful vine in the courtyard of his house and sons like shoots round an olive tree (Psalm 128:1-3).

In the Old Testament one cannot help but see the hand of God at work in the formation of the fetus. In Exodus 4:11 the Lord spoke to Moses and said: "Who has made a man's mouth? Who makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" Job pondered his creation at the hand of God. Job 10:8-10 reads:

Remember that Thou hast made me of clay and wilt
Thou turn me to dust again? Didst Thou not pour me
out like milk and curdle me like cheese? Thou didst
clothe me with skin and flesh, and knit me together
with bones and sinews. Thou hast granted me life and
steadfast love; and Thy care has preserved my spirit.

Again Job said of God's part in the creation of life: "Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:15). Isaiah repeats a similar theme: "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: I am the Lord, who made all things, who stretched out the heavens" (Isaiah 44:24). Jeremiah too saw God as the creator of life: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). Thus, the Old Testament speaks of God's creative power at work within the

womb, forming the person to be born. Some have suggested that the Old Testament contains no law against premeditated abortion because the problem did not exist in the Jewish community. A. E. Crawley said: "Foeticide is not referred to in the Mosaic Law. The omission is one indication, among many, of the intense regard felt by the Jewish people for parenthood and the future of their race."¹⁰

Other peoples, as we have mentioned, differed from the Jews in their attitude toward children. Tacitus the historian, in a generally uncomplimentary account of the Jews, found it remarkable that they did not kill children who were born after the father had made his will, that is, children born when the parents no longer wanted offspring as heirs.¹¹ Indifference to what a parent did with his offspring was the general rule. The conventional Roman attitude toward the fetus and infant was strikingly callous. Seneca referred to the drowning of abnormal or weakly children at birth as a commonplace and as a reasonable kind of action (*De Ira*, 1.15).¹² Philo noted that it was not unusual for parents to strangle their infants, drown them with attached weights, or expose them in deserted areas to wild beasts and carnivorous birds.¹³

Some of the opening narratives of the New Testament record the wanton and senseless destruction of infant life. The callousness of the age is reflected in the actions of King Herod. It was an insensitive society which permitted the slaughter of young children. In Matthew 2:16-18 we read:

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all the region who were two years old or under. . . A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.

It is against this backdrop that we hear the words of Jesus: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:13-14). Christ cared even for these little ones, these newborn babies (*brephe*). The New Testament teaches the importance of the unborn infant too when Mary is described as having in her womb what was from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18). Mary is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth during her pregnancy with the words, "blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Luke 1:42). The infant of Elizabeth leaps within her when Mary is greeted (Luke 1:40). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Joseph's first reaction to Mary's "miraculous" pregnancy is to put her away, not to have her procure an abortion.

Although St. Paul does not directly address the abortion

issue, he does remind the Galatian Christians that the law is fulfilled in one word, love: "Love your neighbor as yourself." St. Paul describes the Christian way of life as something opposed to the way of the flesh. The works of the flesh include lechery, idolatry, and *pharmakeia* (Galatians 5:20). The word *pharmakeia* refers to the use of drugs with occult associations for a variety of purposes, among them effecting an abortion.¹⁴ Thus, the term surely includes the use of abortifacient drugs. In Revelation 9:21 and 21:8 those who practice *pharmakeia* are classified with murderers and fornicators. Revelation 21:8 says that murderers, fornicators, and *pharmakoi* shall be thrown into "the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death." These *pharmakoi* like "fornicators, murderers, idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood," cannot hope to enter the heavenly city (Revelation 22:15).

Like the New Testament writers, the early church also denounced abortion and its companion practice, infanticide. The *Didache* laid down these demands: "thou shalt do no murder, commit no adultery . . . thou shalt not procure an abortion, nor commit infanticide."¹⁵ Those who are "killers of the child, who abort the mold (*plasma*) of God" are following the "Way of Death." The *Epistle of Barnabas* stated, "thou shalt not procure an abortion, thou shalt not commit infanticide."¹⁶ Further, *Barnabas* 19:5 forbade anyone to slay a child by abortion or kill what is generated. Tertullian wrote of abortion: "to us it is *parricidium*," the worst murder, the murder of a blood-relative. Athenagoras held that the embryo was already a human being and an object of divine love and providence. This principle contradicted the view expressed in Roman law that the embryo was still a part of the body of the mother.¹⁷ Thus, while contemporary Roman law saw life as dispensable, the early Christians saw it, including the life of the embryo, as a divine creation and hence inviolable.

The early fathers, therefore, severely censured those who professed to be Christians and yet obtained abortions. Jerome wrote in his Epistle 22, "To Eustochium," of his abhorrence of abortion in the Christian community:

Some (Christian women) go so far as to take potions, that they may insure barrenness, and thus murder human beings almost before their conception. Some when they find themselves with child through their sin, use drugs to procure abortion, and when (as often happens) they die with their offspring, they enter the lower world laden with guilt not only of adultery against Christ but also of suicide and child murder.¹⁸

St. Augustine, in his *Marriage and Concupiscence*, spoke of the

married Christians who avoided children as follows:

Sometimes this lustful cruelty or cruel list comes to this that they even procure poisons of sterility, and if these do not work, they extinguish and destroy the fetus in some way in the womb, preferring that their offspring die before it was born. Assuredly if both husband and wife are like this, they are not married, and if they were like this from the beginning, they come together not joined in matrimony but seduction. If both are not like this, I dare to say that either the wife is in a fashion the harlot of her husband, or he is an adulterer with his own wife.¹⁹

In the second century Athenagoras and Clement of Alexandria attacked abortion with zeal. Two apocryphal works, the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Paul* testify to popular abhorrence of the abortionist in the early Christian church. In the third century abortion was vigorously condemned by Tertullian and Cyprian. The fourth century compilation, the "Apostolic Constitutions," denounced the killing of a fetus.²⁰ John Noonan summarized the early Christian view of abortion when he wrote:

Although therapeutic and social reasons for abortion were known from the best of doctors and philosophers, these reasons were never mentioned as justification. All the writers agreed that abortion was a violation of the love owed to one's neighbor. Some saw it as a special failure of maternal love. Many saw it also as failure to have reverence for the work of God the creator. The culture had accepted abortion. The Christians condemned it. Ancient authorities and contemporary moralists had approved, hesitated, made exceptions, but the Christian rule was certain.²¹

This Christian rule remained certain for nineteen centuries. Recently, however, this unanimity in Christendom has vanished. There is disagreement on the allowability of abortion even among the Lutherans of the United States. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, like the early church, condemns abortion. The Synod has stated her position clearly:

1. Life is a gift from God.
2. Human beings are created for eternal life.
3. Human life is created for fulfillment.
4. Life and death belong to the province of God.
5. Permissive legislative (Roe vs. Wade) never cancels a Christian's responsibility to obey the will of God revealed in the Scriptures.²²

The decision of the Supreme Court of the United States has not cancelled the spiritual responsibility of the Missouri-Synod Lutheran to defend the life and health of the embryo.

While Missouri-Synod Lutherans strongly oppose abortion, however, the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America are decidedly more tolerant of abortion on demand. The American Lutheran Church, for its part, has stated in a document entitled "Christian Counseling on Abortion" that it rejects induced abortion as a ready solution for problem pregnancies, and that induced abortion deliberately ends a developing human life.²³ Yet the ALC also asserts that the developing life may need to be terminated in order to defend the health and wholeness of the person already present and already participating in the relationships and responsibilities of life.²⁴ The same publication states that other factors to be considered when contemplating an abortion are the physical and emotional health of the prospective parents and of other children in the family; the economic factors at stake; the religious beliefs; and alternatives to abortion.

Still another approach is that of the Lutheran Church in America which has stated that people have a right not to have children without being accused of selfishness or a betrayal of the divine plan; and that every child has a right to be a wanted child.²⁵ The LCA claims to deal with abortion on the basis of an "evangelical ethic":

In the consideration of induced abortion the key issue is the status of the unborn fetus. Since the fetus is the organic beginning of human life, the termination of its development is always a serious matter. Nevertheless, a qualitative distinction must be made between its claims and the rights of a responsible person made in God's image who is in living relationships with God and other human beings.²⁶

The LCA feels that a woman or couple may decide responsibly to seek an abortion, but those involved should give earnest consideration to the life and total health of the mother, her responsibilities to others in her family, the stage of development of the fetus, the economic and psychological stability of the home, the law of the land, and the consequences for society as a whole. When the views of the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America on abortion are examined, one can see that they are closer to other Protestant denominations than they are to their fellow-Lutherans in the Missouri Synod.

FOOTNOTES

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2. H. Rackham, ed., *Aristotle: Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 623-625.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 623.
4. Tom D. Moore, *Ross Conference on Pediatric Research: Ethical Dilemmas in Current Obstetrics and Newborn Care* (Columbus, Ohio: Ross Laboratories, 1973), p. 17.
5. John T. Noonan, *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 3-4.
6. W.H. Jones, ed., *Hippocrates* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 299.
7. William Barclay, *Barclay Introduces the Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1973), Tape One.
8. F.H. Colson, ed., *Philo* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 547.
9. Bruce K. Waltke, "Reflections From the Old Testament on Abortion," *Christian Medical Society Journal*, 7 (Summer 1976), p. 3.
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11. John T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 86.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
13. Colson, *op. cit.*, p. 547.
14. Noonan, *The Morality of Abortion*, p. 9.
15. Kirsopp Lake, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 313.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 403.
17. Herman Sasse, "Abortion," *The Christian News*, August 30, 1976, p. 5.
18. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 6 (1954), p. 27.
19. Noonan, *The Morality of Abortion*, p. 16.
20. Noonan, *Contraception*, p. 88.
21. Noonan, *Abortion*, p. 18.
22. Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Abortion: Theological, Legal and Medical Aspects* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), p. 4.
23. Office of Research and Analysis, *Christian Counseling on Abortion*, (Minneapolis: The American Lutheran Church, 1974), p. 1.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
25. Board of Social Ministry, *Sex, Marriage, and Family* (New York: The Lutheran Church in America, 1970), p. 4.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 5.