

THE BIBLE'S VIEW ON ABORTION

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by Robert V. McCabe, Jr., Th.D.

Registrar and Professor of Old Testament

Since the Supreme Court's decision legalizing abortion in the case *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973, there have been more than 30 million abortions. In the United States, abortion is the leading surgical procedure. In fourteen leading metropolitan areas, there are more abortions performed than there are live births (Alcorn, *ProLife Answers to ProChoice Arguments*, p. 29). Because of the impact that abortion has on our society, Bible-believing Christians must ask this question: What does God have to say about abortion? To fully understand what the Bible has to say on this subject, we will examine three issues: the reason why the Bible never explicitly discusses abortion, the Bible's teaching concerning the value of human life, and its teaching about the inception of human life. Before we examine these issues, we will initially define abortion and some of the issues associated with it.

An abortion may be defined as the expulsion of an embryo or fetus from the womb of its mother before it is capable of independently sustaining life. An abortion which happens naturally is called a spontaneous or involuntary abortion. A miscarriage is a spontaneous abortion. An induced or voluntary abortion is medically induced for therapeutic or nontherapeutic reasons. This type of abortion results in the termination of a pregnancy by killing the embryo or fetus. The induced abortion is the focal point of the modern abortion debate.

Most Bible-believing Christians maintain that an induced abortion is a moral atrocity. However, if this is truly such an atrocity, then why does the Bible never explicitly address the issue? The answer to this is found in the Israelite view of children. God was responsible for the opening the womb (Gen 30:22; 1 Sam 1:19–20). Consequently, children were viewed as a gift from God (Gen 33:5; Ps 127:3). An Israelite expected proliferation in childbearing as an aspect of the prosperity that God had promised in the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 7:13; 28:4). The abundance of children was a blessing, but the lack of children was often considered a curse. Therefore, a voluntary abortion was unthinkable for an Israelite and, consequently, was not an issue that needed to be addressed in Scripture. To understand the moral ramifications of this, we must approach the issue of medically induced abortion in light of other biblical material.

What does the Bible teach about the value of human life? To determine this, we must briefly examine the Bible's teaching about man. Moses wrote in Genesis 1:26–28 that man was created in the image and likeness of God. The divine image refers to those personal, rational, moral, and spiritual qualities of man which make him like God. Though it was marred at the Fall, the divine image in man was not lost (Jas 3:9). This is cogently demonstrated in Genesis 9:5–6 with God's institution of capital punishment for murder. The motivation for this command is God's creation of man in his image (v. 6). Whatever else Genesis 9:5–6 may affirm, it clearly emphasizes the sanctity of human life. This is reinforced by the sixth commandment of the Decalogue, "Thou shalt not murder" (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:17), and is reaffirmed by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21–22). Though these Scriptures clearly assert the sanctity of human life, they do not deal with the question of when genuine human life begins.

What does the Bible teach concerning the inception of human life? A key passage is Psalm 51. This is a record of David's confession of sin after having committed adultery with Bathsheba. In v. 5 David traces his moral culpability back to the time of his conception by asserting that he was sinful from the time his mother conceived him. Another significant passage is Psalm 139:13–16. Having dealt with God's omniscience (vv. 1–6) and omnipresence (vv. 7–12), David then gives an exposition on God's providential involvement in his prenatal development. God created David's inmost being (v. 13) and his

body (v. 15). David affirms in v. 16 that his “substance,” his embryo, as well as the course of his life, was part of God’s plan. David’s personal identity extends back to his prenatal state. In addition, Luke 1:41, 44 has a bearing on this subject. After an angel had announced to the virgin Mary that she would carry the Messiah, she went to the home of Elizabeth, who was six months pregnant with her son John. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, her unborn son leaped for joy. This demonstrates that John the Baptist had rational and spiritual capacities in his prenatal state. These passages indicate that a child in his prenatal state has personal, rational, moral, and spiritual qualities, and, therefore, is fully human.

This understanding of a child being fully in the image of God from the time of conception is further supported by two other biblical items. The first is the biblical teaching concerning the origin of the human soul. God created the human race immediately in Adam. Adam and Eve transferred their spiritual and physical characteristics to their children through the process of procreation (Gen 5:3; Acts 17:26). When an ovum and sperm unite, a new person containing the hereditary characteristics of one’s father and mother is brought into existence. This prenatal child is a genuine person.

The second item which argues that an unborn child is fully human is found in the teaching of Exodus 21:22–25. However, this passage has some interpretational difficulties. The passage has been used by some to support the legitimacy of having a medically induced abortion. The passage reads as follows: “²²If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart *from her*, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman’s husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges *determine*. ²³And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, ²⁴eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” There are two principal views of this passage: the miscarriage view and the premature birth view.

Many holding the miscarriage view take this passage as a reference to a situation where two men are fighting and one of them happens to hit a pregnant woman who suffers a miscarriage (“so that her fruit depart”) but she herself does not experience any “harm” (“mischief” in vv. 22 and 23 may also be taken as “harm”); the offender then must pay a fine (v. 22). However, if something subsequently happens to the woman, then the offender is to suffer punishment in proportion to the damage that he has inflicted upon the woman (vv. 23–25). Since the law of retaliation is applied to the woman and only a monetary compensation for the aborted fetus, it is implied that the woman has a higher value than the unborn child. The situation described in this biblical passage has been used to infer that under some difficult circumstances, a voluntary abortion is justifiable because the mother’s life has more value than the unborn child. The miscarriage view is supported by some commentators and translations. For example, some translate the clause “so that her fruit depart” as “so that she has a miscarriage.” Against this view, it should be observed that the Hebrew verb “depart” when used in the context of childbirth is never used for a miscarriage. Furthermore, the noun “fruit” is normally translated as “child,” “son,” or “boy.”

The correct interpretation of Exodus 21:22–25 is that it refers to a premature birth. When the Hebrew noun “fruit” or “child” is used with the verb “depart,” as in v. 22 (“so that her fruit depart”), this can only be understood as a reference to premature birth. This view would explain the situation described in vv. 22–25 in this fashion. If two men are fighting and one of them hits a pregnant woman causing her to prematurely give birth, there are two potential consequences. First, if there is no harm, a fine is to be enacted because of the potential danger for the mother and her child (v. 22). Second, if there is harm, a penalty corresponding to the crime is to be enacted (vv. 23–25). For example, if either the mother or her child dies, then a capital punishment would be in order. Rather than being a justification for voluntary abortion, this is actually a strong text arguing that the life of a child in its prenatal state is of equal value to its mother. Consequently, the unborn child is fully human.

In light of the biblical material examined here, we must emphatically maintain that a medically induced abortion violates God’s moral standard against taking another person’s life. Since God is the author of his moral standards, our view on abortion is ultimately a reflection of our view of God.