

Dead Silence:

Must the Bible say that Abortion is Wrong before We Can Know that it's Wrong?

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Abstract:

The case for elective abortion based on the alleged silence of Scripture is weak. First, the Bible's silence on abortion does not mean that its authors condoned the practice, but that prohibitions against it were largely unnecessary. The Hebrews of the Old Testament and Christians of the New were not likely to kill their offspring before birth. Second, we don't need Scripture to expressly say elective abortion is wrong before we can know that it's wrong. The Bible affirms that all humans have value because they bear God's image. The facts of science make clear that from the earliest stages of development, the unborn are unquestionably human. Hence, Biblical commands against the unjust taking of human life apply to the unborn as they do other human beings. Third, abortion advocates cannot account for basic human equality. If humans have value only because of some acquired property like self-awareness, it follows that since this acquired property comes in varying degrees, basic human rights come in varying degrees. Theologically, it's far more reasonable to argue that although humans differ immensely in their respective degrees of development, they are nonetheless equal because they share a common human nature made in the image of God.

Abortion advocates with The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and Planned Parenthood Federation of America contend that the Bible is silent on abortion and that none of the Scriptures traditionally cited by pro-life advocates establishes the humanity of the unborn. "One thing the Bible does not say is 'Thou shalt not abort,'" writes Roy Bowen Ward, Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion at Miami University of Ohio.¹ His advice to pro-life Jews and Christians is simple: Speak where the Bible speaks and be Silent where it is silent.

Reverend Mark Bigelow, Member of Planned Parenthood's Clergy Advisory Board, writes: "Even as a minister I am careful what I presume Jesus would do if he were alive today, but one thing I know from the Bible is that Jesus was not against women having a choice in continuing a pregnancy. He never said a word about abortion (nor did anyone else in the Bible) even though abortion was available and in use in his time."² Paul D. Simmons, former Professor of Christian Ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, finds the Bible's

¹ Roy Bowen Ward, "Is the Fetus a Person?" *Mission Journal* (January 1986). Article is posted by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice at www.rcrc.org

² Mark Bigelow, Letter to Bill O' Reilly of Fox News, November 22, 2002.

silence on abortion “profound” and remarks that not once does the subject appear in the Apostle Paul’s lists of prohibited actions.³ We can sum up the thinking of all three men this way: If the Bible doesn’t condemn abortion, perhaps pro-life advocates shouldn’t either. We should trust each woman to decide for herself according to the dictates of her own faith.

Suppose we grant that Ward, Bigelow, and Simmons are correct: Scripture is silent on abortion. Let’s further suppose that none of the specific passages cited by pro-life advocates (Psalm 51: 5, 139: 13-15, and Luke 1: 41-44 to name a few) demonstrates conclusively that the unborn are human. What follows? Are we to conclude from the alleged silence of Scripture that women have a God-given right to abort?

The purpose of this article is to integrate theology, science, and philosophy in such a way as to render the theological case for abortion rights highly implausible.⁴ This cumulative case against abortion will be argued in three steps: 1) Theologically, it does not follow that because the Bible is silent abortion is permitted. There are better explanations for the Bible’s silence. 2) Philosophically, Scripture teaches that humans are intrinsically valuable in virtue of the kind of thing they are and this truth cannot be squared with the pro-abortion belief that human value is an acquired property. 3) Scientifically, we don’t need Scripture to say the unborn are human in order for us to know they are human. A positive case for the humanity of the unborn can be made apart from Scripture. Finally, I will show that Exodus 21: 22-25—a favorite of abortion advocates—cannot be used to deny the humanity of the unborn or affirm a mother’s right to elective abortion. To the contrary, a more careful reading of the text actually provides support for the pro-life view.

Does silence equal permission?

Abortion advocates are correct that the Bible does not specifically mention abortion, but what’s the best explanation for its silence?

The hidden (and undefended) premise in the argument advanced by Ward, Bigelow, and Simmons is that whatever the Bible doesn’t condemn it condones. It’s easy to see why this premise is flawed. The Biblical documents do not expressly condemn many things including racial discrimination against Blacks, killing abortion doctors for fun, and lynching homosexuals, yet few people proclaim these acts morally justified. To the contrary, we know

³ Paul D. Simmons, “Personhood, the Bible, and the Abortion Debate,” article published by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice at www.rcrc.org/religion/es3/comp.html

⁴ Of course, this raises the question of what should be done when theology alone cannot resolve a Biblical dispute. That is, if Scripture does not directly address an important moral question, can science and philosophy aid theology in a quest for doctrinal truth? If so, what might that look like on an issue like abortion? These procedural questions are not, strictly speaking, merely theological, but philosophical as well. They relate directly to one’s philosophy of religion. This paper demonstrates that they can often work together to help us draw the correct inferences needed to arrive at Biblical truth on moral matters.

they are wrong by inference. For example, Scripture tells us it's wrong to treat human beings unjustly. Lynching homosexuals treats human beings unjustly. Therefore, we know that Scripture condemns this activity even if the topic of lynching is never addressed. A century ago, racists argued from the alleged silence of Scripture that Blacks were not human. Some went so far as to deny that Blacks had souls.⁵ Again, this was hardly persuasive. While Scripture does not mention every specific race and nationality, it does teach that all humans are made in God's image and were created to have fellowship with Him (Genesis 1:26, Galatians 3: 28, Colossians 3: 10-11). The inference is clear: If Blacks are human beings, they, too, are made in God's image. No further proof from Scripture is necessary. As we shall see, the same is true with the unborn. If embryos and fetuses are human beings, commands that forbid the unjust taking of human life apply to them as they do other humans. Appealing to the Bible's alleged silence on abortion misses the point entirely. That is why when abortion advocates argue their case from the silence of Scripture, I ask: "Are you saying that whenever the Bible does not specifically condemn something, it condones it?" When they say "no" (and they must), I reply, "Then what is your point?"⁶

Contra Ward, Bigelow, and Simmons, there are good reasons to suppose the alleged silence of Scripture does not mean the Biblical writers condoned abortion, but that prohibitions against it were largely unnecessary. We should remember that the Bible as a whole is not a comprehensive code of ethics, but the story of God's redemption of His people. That is to say, the Biblical writers, under guidance from the Holy Spirit, selectively discuss subjects relevant to their intended audiences while leaving many other topics unstated. I will return to this point later, but suffice to say that if the Hebrews of the Old Testament and the Christians of the New were not inclined to abort their unborn offspring, there's little reason for Scripture to address the matter.

Indeed, Biblical and cultural evidence suggests they were not inclined to consider abortion even though it was practiced in the surrounding cultures.⁷ Turning first to the Hebrew worldview of the Old Testament, we find that:

- Humans have intrinsic value in virtue of the kind of thing they are -- creatures made in the image of God. Hence, the shedding of innocent blood is strictly forbidden (Genesis 1:26, 9:6, Exodus 23:7, Proverbs 6:16-17).
- Children were seldom seen as unwanted or as a nuisance (unless they turn wicked), but as a gift from God -- the highest possible blessing (Psalms 127:3-5, 113:9, Gen. 17:6, 33:5). Joseph, for example, is blessed to see his own great-grandchildren.

⁵ Josiah Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery: Origin, Fortunes and History of the Negro Race*, 5th ed. (Glasgow, Ky: W.S. Brown, 1852) p. 33. Cited in Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) p. 560.

⁶ Greg Koukl develops this line of questioning in "Tactics in Defending the Faith" available from Stand to Reason at www.str.org

⁷ I'm indebted here to the research of Germain Grisez and Michael Gorman, whose work I cite below.

- Immortality was expressed through one's descendants. God promises Abraham to make of him a great nation and that promise is passed on to Isaac, Jacob, etc. "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him," writes the Psalmist (127:3. See also Gen. 48:16). This was not mere poetic language from a sentimental parent. For the Israelites of that day, the birth of children represented immortality at a national as well as personal level. As N.T. Wright points out, the hope of the Old Testament writers "focused not on the fate of individual humans after death, but on the fate of Israel and her promised-land. The nation and the land of the present world were far more important than what happened to an individual beyond the grave. The very hope of the nation was thus first and foremost that the people, the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would multiply and flourish. . . . To perpetuate not only the nation but one's own individual family line was thus a sacred responsibility, requiring special customs and laws to safeguard it." In short, Wright concludes that for the devout Israelite, "continuance of the family line was not simply a matter of keeping a family name alive. It was part of the way in which God's promises, for Israel and perhaps even the whole world, would be fulfilled."⁸
- Therefore, it comes as no surprise that sterility and barrenness were a curse, a source of great shame and sorrow. Hence, Peninnah's harsh ridicule of Hannah, the Prophet Samuel's mother, because of the latter's initial barrenness (1 Samuel 1:6. See also Gen. 20:17-18, 30:1, 22-23). Likewise, to see one's own offspring suffer premature death was perhaps the greatest parental disaster imaginable.

As Germain Grisez points out, among a Hebrew people who saw children as a gift and barrenness as a curse, it was unthinkable that an Israelite woman should desire an abortion. Hence, the Old Testament's silence on abortion suggests that prohibitions against it were largely unnecessary, not that the practice was tacitly approved.⁹

Ward disputes this conclusion, noting it was common for authors of both Testaments to condemn the practices of neighboring nations, "such as idol worship, sacred prostitution, and the like, yet they did not choose to condemn abortion"—a practice common in those surrounding cultures.¹⁰

Ward's rejoinder, however, is not persuasive. Unlike abortion, idolatrous practices were not restricted to foreign cultures, but pervasive among God's *own* people. It's odd that Ward overlooks this. Indeed, Israel and Judah were taken captive on numerous occasions precisely because of their persistent idolatry (Psalm 106: 35-43, Jeremiah 1: 16, 2:23, Ezekiel 6: 1-10). Hence, it's no surprise the biblical writers mention this sin but not abortion. Moreover, Ward's argument from silence proves too much. The Bible does not mention one of the most heinous practices of the surrounding ancient world, female infanticide. Does it follow that the

⁸ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) pp. 99-100.

⁹ Germain Grisez, *Abortion: the Myths, the Realities, and the Arguments* (New York: Corpus Books, 1970) pp. 123-127.

¹⁰ Ward, "Is the Fetus a Person?"

act is morally justified? Again, the question is not “Was abortion practiced in the ancient world by neighboring cultures?” (It was), but “Was it practiced by the people the Biblical authors specifically address, in this case, the Hebrew culture of that day?” In short, Ward fails to interpret the Old Testament within its own intellectual and cultural framework. His contention that the absence of a direct prohibition meant that women had a God-given right to kill their offspring was utterly foreign to the Hebrew culture of the time for the reasons cited above.

The same is true of the New Testament. Michael Gorman writes that the first Christians, including all but one of the New Testament authors, were Jewish Christians with an essentially Jewish morality.¹¹ Hence, if a Jewish consensus against abortion existed at the time, the early Christians most certainly would have shared that consensus.

As Gorman points out, early Judaism was, in fact, quite firmly opposed to abortion. Jewish documents from the period condemn the practice unequivocally, demonstrating a clear anti-abortion consensus among first century Jews:¹²

- *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* (written between 50 B.C. and A.D. 50): "A woman should not destroy the unborn babe in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before the dogs and vultures."
- *The Sibylline Oracles* includes among the wicked those who "produce abortions and unlawfully cast their offspring away." Also condemned are sorcerers who dispense abortifacients.
- *1 Enoch* (first or second century B.C.) says that an evil angel taught humans how to "smash the embryo in the womb."
- Josephus (first-century Jewish historian): "The law orders all the offspring be brought up, and forbids women either to cause abortion or to make away with the fetus." A woman who did so was considered to have committed infanticide because she destroyed a "soul" and hence diminished the race.

These texts, writes Gorman, "bear witness to the general Jewish and Jewish-Christian attitude of the first and second centuries, thus confirming that the earliest Christians shared the anti-abortion position of their Jewish forebears."¹³

Finally, we should remember that theology of the New Testament is primarily task theology written to address specific issues in specific churches. For example, Paul is largely silent on

¹¹ Michael Gorman, "Why Is the New Testament Silent About Abortion?" (*Christianity Today*, Jan. 11, 1993).

¹² The following sources are cited in Gorman, *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

the historical career of Christ (he mentions it only in passing while underscoring the importance of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15), but this does not mean that he questioned the facts of Jesus' earthly ministry. Rather, a discussion of those facts never became necessary. To cite New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd, "We may say that we owe whatever understanding we have of Paul's thought to the 'accidents of history' which required him to deal with various problems, doctrinal and practical, in the life of the churches."¹⁴ The best explanation, then, for the New Testament's silence on abortion is not that its authors condoned the practice, but that a discussion of the issue was unnecessary. As Gorman points out, there was no deviation from the norm inherited from Judaism. Unlike the surrounding pagan cultures, the early Christians to whom the New Testament was written were simply not tempted to kill their children before or after birth.

What is the unborn and why should we care?

The morality of abortion comes down to just one question: Is the unborn a member of the human family? If so, elective abortion is a serious moral wrong that violates Biblical commands against the unjust taking of human life (Exodus 23:7, Psalm 106: 37-38, Proverbs 6: 16-19, Matthew 5:21). It treats the distinct human being, made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 9:6, James 3:9), as nothing more than a disposable instrument. Conversely, if the unborn are not human, elective abortion requires no more justification than having your tooth pulled.

While Scripture (we will grant) is silent on the humanity of the unborn (as it is on the specific humanity of Whites, Blacks, Asians, etc.) it's clear that we are not to take human life without justification. Hence, if a positive case can be made for the humanity of the unborn apart from Scripture (as we know the French are human apart from Scripture), we can logically conclude that Biblical commands against the unjust taking of human life apply to the unborn as they do other human beings. At this point, science provides an assist to theology. That is to say, science gives us the facts we need to arrive at a theologically sound conclusion.

What the facts of science make clear is that from the earliest stages of development, the unborn are distinct, living, and whole human beings. True, they have yet to grow and mature, but they are whole human beings nonetheless. Leading embryology textbooks affirm this.¹⁵

Abortion-advocate Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, whose work is prominently featured by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, insists that we gain no theological knowledge from these facts. "The fetus is biologically human only in the sense that any part of a human

¹⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) pp. 377-8.

¹⁵ See T.W. Sadler, *Langman's Embryology*, 5th ed. (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1993) p. 3; Keith L. Moore, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology* (Toronto: B.C. Decker, 1988) p. 2; O'Rahilly, Ronand and Muller, Pabiola, *Human Embryology and Teratology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley-Liss, 1996) pp. 8, 29.

body is human: every cell carries the full genetic code. A severed hand,” she continues “is genetically human as well but we don’t call it a person.”¹⁶ In other words, Mollenkott would have us believe there is no difference in kind between a human embryo and each of our cells. This is bad biology. Mollenkott is making the rather elementary mistake of confusing parts with wholes. The difference in kind between each of our cells and a human embryo is clear: An individual cell’s functions are subordinated to the survival of the larger organism of which it is merely a part. The human embryo, however, is already a whole human entity. Robert George and Patrick Lee say it well. It makes no sense to say that you were once a sperm or somatic cell. However, the facts of science make clear that you were once a human embryo. “Somatic cells are not, and embryonic human beings are, distinct, self-integrating organisms capable of directing their own maturation as members of the human species.”¹⁷

Dr. Maureen Condic points out that embryos are living human beings “precisely because they possess the single defining feature of human life that is lost in the moment of death—the ability to function as a coordinated organism rather than merely as a group of living human cells.” Condic, Assistant Professor of Neurobiology and Anatomy at the University of Utah, explains the important distinction between individual body parts and whole human embryos overlooked by Mollenkott:

The critical difference between a collection of cells and a living organism is the ability of an organism to act in a coordinated manner for the continued health and maintenance of the body as a whole. It is precisely this ability that breaks down at the moment of death, however death might occur. Dead bodies may have plenty of live cells, but their cells no longer function together in a coordinated manner.¹⁸

From conception forward, human embryos clearly function as whole organisms. “Embryos are not merely collections of human cells, but living creatures with all the properties that define any organism as distinct from a group of cells; embryos are capable of growing, maturing, maintaining a physiologic balance between various organ systems, adapting to changing circumstances, and repairing injury. Mere groups of human cells do nothing like this under any circumstances.”¹⁹

What makes humans valuable?

Do humans come to be at one point, but only become valuable later in virtue of some acquired characteristic? In his article, “Personhood, the Bible, and the Abortion Debate,” Paul D. Simmons concedes that zygotes (early embryos) are biologically human but denies

¹⁶ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, “Respecting the Moral Agency of Women,” published by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, www.rcrc.org

¹⁷ Robert George and Patrick Lee, “Reason, Science, and Stem Cells,” *National Review On-Line*, July 20, 2001.

¹⁸ Maureen L. Condic, “Life: Defining the Beginning by the End,” *First Things*, May 2003.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

they are “complex” or “developed enough” to qualify as “persons” in a Biblical sense. “No one can deny the continuum from fertilization to maturity and adulthood,” writes Simmons. “That does not mean, however, that every step on the continuum has the same value or constitutes the same entity.”²⁰ Simmons’ larger purpose is to defend abortion rights by telling us who does and does not bear God’s image. He argues that humans bear that image (and hence, have value as “persons”) not in virtue of the kind of thing they are (members of a natural kind or species), but only because of an acquired property, in this case, the immediate capacity for self-awareness. A “person,” he contends, “has capacities of reflective choice, relational responses, social experience, moral perception, and self-awareness.” Zygotes, as mere clusters of human cells, do not have this capacity and therefore do not bear God’s image.²¹

Right away there are counter examples that underscore the arbitrary nature of Simmons’ claim. First, newborns cannot make conscious, reflective choices until several months after birth, so what’s wrong with infanticide?²² What principled reason can he give for saying, “No, you can’t do that?” As Peter Singer points out in *Practical Ethics*, if self-awareness makes one valuable as a person, and newborns like fetuses lack that property, it follows that fetus and newborn are both disqualified. You can’t draw an arbitrary line at birth and spare the newborn.²³

Abraham Lincoln raised a similar point with slavery, noting that any argument used to disqualify blacks as valuable human beings works equally well to disqualify whites.

You say ‘A’ is white and ‘B’ is black. It is color, then: the lighter having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are a slave to the first man you meet with a fairer skin than your own.

You do not mean color exactly — You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again: By this rule you are to be a slave to the first man you meet with an intellect superior to your own.

But you say it is a question of interest, and, if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you.²⁴

²⁰ Paul D. Simmons, *Ibid.*

²¹ Question: Why should anyone accept Simmons’s claim that there can be such a thing as a human being that is not a ‘person?’ He needs to argue for that, not merely assert it. He fails to do this in his article.

²² Conor Liston & Jerome Kagan, “Brain Development: Memory Enhancement in Early Childhood,” *Nature* 419, 896 (2002). See also O’Rahilly, Ronand and Muller, Pabiola, *Human Embryology and Teratology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley-Liss, 1996) p. 8.

²³ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 169-171.

²⁴ *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Rutgers University Press, 1953) vol. II, p. 222.

In short, Simmons cannot account for basic human equality. As Patrick Lee and Robert George point out, if humans have value only because of some acquired property like skin color or consciousness and not in virtue of the kind of thing they are, then it follows that since these acquired properties come in varying degrees, basic human rights come in varying degrees. Do we really want to say that those with more self-consciousness are more human (and more valuable) than those with less? This relegates the proposition that all men are created equal to the ash heap of history.²⁵ Theologically, it's far more reasonable to argue that although humans differ immensely with respect to talents, accomplishments, and degrees of development, they are nonetheless equal because they share a common human nature made in the image of God. Humans have value simply because they are human.²⁶

Second, if the immediate capacity for consciousness makes one valuable, many non-human animals qualify as persons. This is Peter Singer's point. Singer contends that a variety of non-human animals are rational, self-conscious beings that qualify as persons in the relevant sense of the term. Consequently, dogs, cats, and pigs are valuable persons, while fetuses, newborns, and victims of Alzheimer's disease are not. To favor the pre-conscious infant over a self-conscious dog—simply because the infant is biologically human—makes one guilty of “speciesism,” a crime akin to racism.²⁷ It's hard to see how Simmons can escape this same conclusion given his belief that human value is grounded in self-awareness, not human nature.

Third, human embryos have a basic (root) capacity for self-consciousness, lacking only the immediate capacity for it. They possess this basic capacity, George writes, in virtue of the kind of thing they are—members of a natural kind, a biological species—whose members (if not prevented by some extrinsic cause) in due course develop the immediate capacity for such mental acts.²⁸ We can therefore distinguish two types of capacities for mental functions: 1) immediate and 2) basic, or natural. On what basis can Simmons require for the recognition of full moral respect the first sort of capacity, which is an accidental attribute, and not the second, which is grounded in the kind of thing one already is?²⁹ I cannot think of any non-arbitrary justification. Moreover, one grows in the ability to perform personal acts only because one *already is* the kind of thing that grows into the ability to perform personal acts, i.e., a valuable human being. *My* thoughts and *my* feelings, indeed all of my functional

²⁵ Robert P. George, “Cloning Addendum,” *National Review on-Line*, July 15, 2002; Patrick Lee, “The Pro-Life Argument from Substantial Identity,” Tollefsen Lecture, St. Anselm's College, November 14, 2002.

²⁶ Of course, one could reply that I beg the question here by claiming that humans have value simply because they are human. However, my claim squares with our basic intuitions and is the foundation for virtually all of Western Civilization—our legal codes, civil duties, as well as our understanding of moral obligations. It seems critics must present a good case for surrendering this deeply held intuition before insisting that we relinquish it. They must also tell give us a better account of human equality than the one offered here.

²⁷ Helga Khuse & Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 123. See also Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, pp. 117-119.

²⁸ George, “Cloning Addendum.”

²⁹ Patrick Lee asks this question (though not addressing Simmons) in “The Pro-Life Argument from Substantial Identity.” (See cite above.)

abilities, cannot exist unless *I* first exist. I can exist without them, as, for example, when I am sleeping, but they cannot exist without me.³⁰

In the end, Simmons' case for human value is ad-hoc and arbitrary. Why is some development needed? And why is this particular degree of development, self-awareness, the Biblically relevant factor rather than another? These questions are left unanswered.

Mistaken theology

Some abortion advocates ignore the cumulative case that I have presented and appeal directly to Scripture. Exodus 21: 22-25 is their favorite reference, though it does little to bolster their case. The passage reads in the NASB as follows: "And if men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she has a miscarriage, yet there is no further injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him; and he shall pay as the judges decide. But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise." Abortion advocates argue that this Scripture proves the unborn are not fully human because the penalty for accidentally killing a fetus is less than that for killing its mother. But this argument is flawed on several counts.

First, assuming the pro-abortion interpretation of this passage is correct (i.e., that the unborn's death is treated differently than the mother's), it does not follow that the unborn are not fully human. The preceding verses (21:20-21) present a situation where a master unintentionally kills his slave and escapes with no penalty at all (the lack of intent being proven by the interval between the blow and the death), yet it hardly follows that Scripture considers the slave less than human.

Second, this passage does not even remotely suggest that a woman can *willfully* kill her unborn child through elective abortion. Nothing in the context supports this claim. At best, the text assigns a lesser penalty for *accidentally* killing a fetus than for accidentally killing its mother. It simply does not follow that a woman may *deliberately* abort her own offspring.

Third, the pro-abortion interpretation of this passage (that a lesser penalty applies for accidental fetal death) is highly suspect. When read in the original Hebrew, the passage seems to convey that both the mother and the child are covered by *lex talionis*--the law of retribution. According to Hebrew scholar Dr. Gleason Archer, "There is no second class status attached to the fetus under this rule. The fetus is just as valuable as the mother."³¹ Furthermore, we should not presume that the miscarriage of Exodus 21 produces a dead child, as does elective abortion. Millard Erickson citing the work of Jack Cotrell writes that

³⁰ J.P. Moreland and Gary Habermas, *Beyond Death* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998) p. 27.

³¹ Cited in J. Ankerberg and J. Weldon, *When Does Life Begin* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1989) pp.195-6. See also Meredith Kline, "Lex Talionis & the Human Fetus," *Simon Greenleaf Law Review* 5 [1985-1986] pp.73-89.

the Hebrew word for "miscarriage" in this context is 'yasa'—which often refers to the emergence of a *living* thing.³² (See, for example, Gen. 1:24, 8:17, 15:4, 25:26, 1 Kings 8:19, 2 Kings 20:18.) In this case, the passage can be reasonably translated “the child comes forth” and if it’s not injured, the penalty is merely a fine. But if it is harmed, the penalty is life for life, tooth for tooth, etc. (Note also the text calls the expelled fetus a “child”—a fact abortion advocates cannot easily get around.)

Nephesh.

Roy Bowen Ward argues that humans are uniquely defined as persons by the Hebrew term *nephesh*, which he equates with physical “breath.” Adam, Ward argues, did not become a living soul until God breathed into him the “breath of life” through the nostrils. Because the unborn don’t yet breathe air through the nostrils, Ward contends that they are not valuable human beings.³³ Ward is wrong on four counts.

First, his argument proves too much. Newborns generally do not breathe air through the nostrils until a couple of minutes *after* birth, which means that immediately upon delivery, the parents would be justified committing infanticide if it suits their preferences.

Second, the unborn *do* in fact breathe long before birth, but through the umbilical cord rather than the nostrils. At birth, only the *mode* of breathing changes, like switching from AC current to DC current.³⁴

Third, Ward’s “breath” argument is sloppy theologically. All it proves is that any *adults* that God immediately creates out of dirt are not alive until God breathes air into their nostrils. However, since you and I were not immediately created as adults from raw dirt but began life in the womb, the verse cannot apply to us and is specific only to Adam.

Finally, Ward’s equation of *nephesh* with physical breath is mistaken. As J.P. Moreland and Scott Rae point out in their book *Body and Soul*, although the Hebrew word *nephesh* (soul) primarily applies to human beings, “it is also used of animals (Gen.1:20, 9:10) and God himself (Judges 10:16; Isa. 1:14). When the term is used of God, it certainly cannot mean physical breath or life since God is an immaterial, transcendent self.” Furthermore, “there are passages where *nephesh* refers to the continuing locus of personal identity even after death--when breathing has long ceased” (Gen. 35:18; 1 Kings 17:21; Ps. 16:10, 30:3, 49:15; 86:13, 139:8).³⁵

³² Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999) p. 572. See also Jack Cottrell, “Abortion and the Mosaic Law,” *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1973.

³³ Ward, “Is the Fetus a Person?”

³⁴ Bernard Nathanson, *Aborting America* (New York: Doubleday, 1979)

³⁵ J.P. Moreland, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Dwoners Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000) pp. 27-8.

Conclusion

Taken together, the exegetical, philosophical, and scientific considerations we've examined render the theological case for elective abortion highly unlikely. Nothing in the Hebrew culture of the Old Testament supports the practice. And given the consensus against abortion by early Jewish Christians, there is no reason to suppose that the New Testament authors approved of it either. Moreover, the facts of science make clear that from the earliest stages of development, the unborn are members of the human family. As such, they bear the image of their maker and that alone gives them inestimable value.

Review:

- The alleged silence of Scripture on elective abortion does not make it morally permissible. Rather, the silence of Scripture indicates that prohibitions against the practice were completely unnecessary. Unlike the surrounding pagan cultures, Hebrews and early Christians were not tempted to kill their unborn offspring.
- The pro-life case is simple and does not require direct Biblical teaching. If the unborn are human beings, commands against shedding innocent blood apply to the unborn as they do other children and adults.
- The facts of science make clear that from the earliest stages of development, the unborn are distinct, living, and whole human organisms. These facts are beyond dispute.
- Philosophically, there is no essential difference between Scott Klusendorf the embryo and Scott Klusendorf the adult pro-life apologist. True, his functional abilities have changed, but he's still the same person because he possesses a distinct human nature that was present the moment he began to exist.
- Theological conclusion: Given what we know scientifically and philosophically, we can logically conclude that the unborn, like all human beings, are valuable because they are made in God's image. Therefore, elective abortion is a serious moral wrong because it unjustly harms human beings.

Review Questions

- The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice argues that elective abortion is permissible because the Bible nowhere condemns the practice. What is the hidden premise in this argument and why does it miss the point entirely?
- What question should you ask when abortion advocates argue their case from the alleged silence of Scripture?
- What is the best explanation for the silence of Scripture on abortion?
- List the four reasons why the Hebrews of the Old Testament were unlikely to consider abortion permissible.
- The morality of abortion comes down to just one question. What is that question? And how does it help us clarify a Biblical worldview on abortion despite the Bible's silence?

- How do science and theology work together to help us clarify Biblical truth on abortion?
- Summarize in a sentence the facts of science regarding the unborn. How does abortion-advocate Virginia Ramey Mollenkott confuse these facts?
- Paul D. Simmons argues that humans bear God's image (and hence have value as "persons") not in virtue of the kind of thing they are (members of a natural kind or species), but only because of an acquired property, in this case, the immediate capacity for self-awareness. What follows logically from his Simmons's view? How does it undermine an objective case for human equality?
- Give three reasons why Exodus 21 does absolutely nothing to justify the case for elective abortion. Why is the *nephesh* argument for abortion rights also not persuasive?

Projects to Enhance Learning

You've been asked to prepare a 10-minute pro-life presentation for an adult Sunday-School class at your church. Some people think that because the Bible is silent on abortion, the practice is morally permissible. To clear things up, the leader of the class has requested that you address the theme, "Does the Bible Support Abortion?" You will need to submit your comments in writing in advance, no more than 2 pages. Be sure that your answer includes comments on the following points: 1) Why silence doesn't equal permission, 2) Why the status of the unborn, not the bible's alleged silence, is the key factor when deciding what to think, 3) Why Exodus 21 does not justify elective abortion.

Web Resources for Further Study

- Robert M. Bowman, Jr. "Argument for the Silent: A Biblical Case Against Abortion"
<http://www.reasons.org/resources/fff/2001issue06/index.shtml#abortion>
- Greg Koukl, "What Exodus 21 Says About Abortion?"
<http://www.str.org/free/commentaries/abortion/whatexod.htm>
- John Ankerberg and John Weldon, Comments on Exodus 21
<http://www.johnankerberg.com/Articles/apologetics/AP0503W4.htm>