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COMMENTARIES

DOES THE BIBLE PROHIBIT ABORTION?

Brian Bolton

IN RECENT YEARS, Republican-controlled legislatures in Texas, Wisconsin, Ohio, North Carolina, and many other states have passed new laws restricting access to abortion. These include the requirements that women view an ultrasound image of the fetus, clinics meet the standards for surgery centers, and doctors have admitting privileges in a local hospital. These laws, which can be accurately characterized as legislative harassment, constitute the primary focus of the continuing assault by ultra-fundamentalist Christians on women's reproductive rights. The ultimate goal of the anti-abortion zealots is to outlaw and thereby criminalize all abortions, with no permissible exceptions.

It is a fact that the vast majority of anti-abortion activists are fundamentalist Christians and that their views predominate in the Republican Party. Their strident rhetoric suggests that opposition to abortion derives from the Bible, and they routinely assert that "God loves the unborn." Nothing could be further from the truth. The purpose of this article is to review what the Bible actually says about abortion, providing arguments and scriptural documentation so that advocates of reproductive choice can be prepared to confront and refute the claims of anti-abortion Christian extremists.

Definitions, Misconceptions, Disagreements

A preliminary issue that needs attention is that of proper terminology. Anti-abortion devotees prefer to call themselves pro-life or defenders of life, while labeling pro-choice advocates as "pro-abortion." Pro-choice individuals should be accurately described as abortion rights advocates or defenders of reproductive freedom. Furthermore, anti-abortion fundamentalists are *not* pro-life, because they typically endorse the biblically mandated death penalty, unrestricted access to guns, and pre-emptive military attacks on non-Christian nations. Former U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders infuriated anti-abortion activists when she said they "should get over their love affair with the fetus and start supporting children." While it may not be advisable to go as far as Dr. Elders did, it is essential to stress that appropriate terminology be used in all discussions.

The anti-abortion crusaders suggest in their arguments and propaganda that opposition to abortion derives from a Judeo-Christian principle they characterize as "respect for the sanctity of life." The implication is that all authentic Christians and Jews oppose reproductive choice. The truth is that many religious denominations, churches, and organizations representing main-line Christian and Jewish faith traditions support abortion rights.

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The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, an interfaith assembly of religious people who support a woman's right to choose, lists more than three dozen denominations and organizations as members. If the Bible prohibited abortion, it is doubtful that these faith groups would advocate for abortion rights. It is obvious that there is no unified Judeo-Christian position on abortion and that the Religious Right does not speak for all people of faith. Moreover, it is likely that the anti-abortion fundamentalists represent a minority viewpoint in the U.S. religious community.

One issue that divides the anti-abortion community concerns which, if any, abortion exceptions can be tolerated. The hardliners say that absolutely no exceptions can be permitted, while a slightly more moderate faction believes that situations where the life of the mother is endangered warrant the option of abortion. Allowing the choice of abortion in cases of rape and incest generates a much more contentious argument. In 2012 Republican senatorial candidate Richard Mourland in Indiana infamously declared that "if a woman becomes pregnant as a result of rape—then it's God's will." He was defeated, and the Republican distinction between legitimate rape and illegitimate rape quickly dissolved.

Perhaps the most difficult ethical dilemma for the anti-abortion movement concerns the status of "unborn children" that are not developing normally in the mother's womb. Is there a point at which the abnormal development is so severe that abortion is justified? According to Texas law, which includes an exception after twenty weeks for "severe fetal abnormality," the answer is yes. It is possible that economic considerations trumped "pro-life" values in legislative debates concerning these tragic circumstances, because most severely developmentally compromised fetuses that survive end up being warehoused for life in state institutions for profoundly disabled people at substantial cost to the taxpayers.

Finally, the anti-abortion extremists regularly attempt to impose their dogmas of political correctness on other less extreme members of their coalition. An amusing example occurred last year when Anita Perry (the Texas governor's wife and a nurse) stated in an interview her entirely reasonable position on abortion: "I see it as a woman's right—that is her decision—I don't agree with it—but I am not going to criticize [a pro-choice woman]." The next day Governor Perry publicly rebuked his wife, announcing in a televised statement that she had "misspoken." The poorly informed governor also declared that "abortion is the second most conducted surgical procedure in the U.S.," a falsehood that earned him another "Pants on Fire" rating from Politifact.

Statistics and Opinions

To provide context for the discussion that follows, some data about the frequency of abortion in the U.S. and how people regard abortion are presented. Since abortion was legalized in 1973 with *Roe v. Wade*, approximately fifty-six million intentional or induced abortions have been performed. This is an average of 1.35 million abortions each year, although the rates for two recent years are somewhat lower: 1.2 million in 2008 and 1.1 million in

2011. This decline is consistent with recent trends in teenage pregnancies and overall birth rates, which are down significantly. In fact, the U.S. birthrate reached an all-time low in 2012.

It should be emphasized that more than 90 percent of planned abortions occur within the first trimester (thirteen weeks), while only 2 percent occur after twenty weeks, which is congruent with the *Roe* criteria. Furthermore, in Texas, where 72,000 abortions were performed in 2011, it is a very safe procedure: Pregnancy and childbirth were thirty-four times more likely than an abortion to result in a woman's death, based on data for a decade (2000–2011) compiled by the state health department. Why don't Texas legislators enact new regulations to make childbirth safer for women?

A very different and disturbing statistical reality is that the U.S. has the highest unintended pregnancy rate of any Western industrialized nation. Most Americans understand that comprehensive sexuality education stressing the importance of contraception would reduce the number of abortions—a causal relationship denied by anti-abortion activists, who promote abstinence-only ignorance.

Surveys of national samples conducted over the past decade indicate strong support for legal abortion as operationalized in *Roe v. Wade*. Typically about two-thirds approve of the *Roe* criteria, while less than one-third want *Roe* overturned and all abortion criminalized. In a 2011 national survey, 64 percent of respondents said that a woman should have the right to terminate a pregnancy in the first few months. Even in Texas, with a stronger anti-abortion sentiment, 68 percent of residents think that abortion should be legal in cases of rape or incest and when the life of the mother is endangered. And while 38 percent of Texans want stricter abortion laws, 47 percent prefer the current law or want less strict laws.

The strongest rebuke to the anti-abortionists came two years ago in Mississippi (considered to be the most anti-abortion state) when a fetal personhood initiative that would have accorded legal rights of citizenship to a fertilized egg was defeated 59 percent to 41 percent. In 2014, voters in Colorado rejected a ballot measure defining a fetus as a person for the third time. It can be concluded from survey and voter data that the American public endorses reproductive rights for women and rejects radical anti-abortion theology.

A final set of statistics testifies to the propensity for violence among a small minority of anti-abortion Christian extremists. In the forty years since *Roe v. Wade* was decided, eight abortion providers have been murdered and seventeen have been maimed or seriously injured in attempted murders. More than 6,000 acts of violence have been perpetrated, including fire bombings, arsons, kidnappings, assaults, and death threats. The most recent victim was Dr. George Tiller, who was assassinated in the lobby of his church in Wichita, Kansas, after the murderer had spent three months engaged in daily Bible reading preparing for his mission.

When Does Life Begin?

Anti-abortion activists assert that life begins at the moment of conception when the sperm penetrates the egg. This is the basis for the personhood argument, which states that the fertilized egg is a human person with all the constitutional rights of living people. One fact that is overlooked in this formulation is that the

sperm and the egg separately are living organisms, and thus the fertilized egg is a biological transformation of elemental life components. Life does not begin at this point because it already existed in the elemental components.

But a much more substantial problem with the personhood claim is encompassed in the following facts. While it is true that all human lives must originate with a conceived embryo, it is also true that most fertilized eggs do not become living human infants nine months later. As a result of natural reproductive processes, between one-half and three-quarters of fertilized human eggs or conceived fetuses are spontaneously aborted.

Specifically, about one-third of fertilized human eggs fail to implant in the uterine wall and thus are destroyed. A much smaller fraction of fertilized eggs that do implant terminate before pregnancy is recognized or known. Of the clinically verified pregnancies, a substantial number end in the premature birth of the fetus long before survival is possible. Two million miscarriages or spontaneous abortions occur annually after pregnancy is confirmed in the U.S. and constitute a great disappointment to parents.

For rational people, the three categories of unsuccessful outcomes of pregnancy reflect the result of natural processes but must be considered to be God's abortions from the perspective of theists. In other words, spontaneous abortions are an expression of God's plan of divine design. What does the fact that the majority of conceived embryos do not become human beings say about the personhood dogma? Either God kills human persons for some unknown sacred reason or advocates of personhood are knowingly advancing a theological fiction that is contradicted by medical knowledge.

Lastly, what does the Bible say about the question of when human life begins? Holy Scripture is perfectly clear about this event: God breathed into man's body the breath of life and man then became a living person (Genesis 2:7). At least a dozen additional verses indicate that breath is synonymous with life (Genesis 6:17, 7:22; Job 12:10, 17:1, 33:4; Psalms 104:29, 146:4; Isaiah 2:22, 42:5; Jeremiah 51:17; Ezekiel 37:6, 9, 10; Acts 17:25).

On the other hand, many abortion opponents believe that several verses referring to the development of the fetus in the mother's womb establish the continuity of human existence from the womb to life following birth, which they consider to be an argument against abortion (Psalms 22:10, 58:3, 139:13; Isaiah 49:5; Hosea 12:3; Luke 1:41). Examination of these half-dozen verses reveals that they contain undeniable poetic and some literal truth. But while they illustrate why abortion may be an emotional and controversial issue, they do not provide an explicit prohibition against it. Moreover, we know that God murdered tens of millions of unborn children and hundreds of millions of living children, because the Bible says so, as documented in the next section. Of course, any estimates like these depend on Christian assertions about the age of the Earth, which range from 6,000 years to 4.5 billion years.

Does the Bible Condemn Abortion?

Abortion is unequivocally a religious issue for the anti-abortion disciples. For example, Fox TV celebrity the Reverend Mike Huckabee

says that the unborn child has a God-given right to life, life is a gift from God, and abortion is the sinful destruction of God's sacred creation. Yet those who oppose abortion seldom cite Scripture to support their claims. Does God really oppose what the anti-abortion zealots call the "murder of unborn children"? As the Bible documentation in this section shows, God is not concerned about the destruction of either unborn or living children. Three primary categories of evidence are relevant: monumental massacres, major slaughters, and promised retribution for disobedience.

Three events of truly biblical proportions comprise the category of evidence labeled monumental massacres: the Noachian Deluge, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Conquest of Canaan.

- God destroyed by drowning all living people (except eight adults), because they were deemed to be incorrigibly wicked (and human women cross-bred with evil spirit beings), in the Noachian Flood (Genesis 6, 7, and 8).
- God destroyed by fire from heaven all living people (except three adults) in Sodom and Gomorrah and surrounding cities and villages (except Zoar) (Genesis 18, 19).
- God ordained the massacre of all residents of the cities and nearby towns ruled by thirty-three kings—not one person was left alive—in the Conquest of Canaan (including the Transjordan) (Numbers 21, 31, 33; Deuteronomy 2, 3, 7, 20; and Joshua 6, 8, 10, 11, 12).

How many men, women, children, babies, and infants were killed in these three events? How many pregnant women and their unborn children were murdered? The total numbers must be astronomical, because the death toll for the Conquest of Canaan alone is estimated to be between fourteen and twenty million, based on Deuteronomy 7:1–2 and Exodus 12:37. The point that must be emphasized here and in the episodes listed below is that whenever the entire population of a city or nation or planet Earth is annihilated, it is a certainty that pregnant mothers-to-be and their "unborn children" are included among the victims. Are they properly regarded as "collateral damage" in God's quest for cosmic justice and a future kingdom? Hyper-jealous God's motive for killing everyone was to prevent the Israelites from worshipping other gods (Deuteronomy 20:10-18).

At least twenty episodes compose the category of major slaughters, in which the biblical record states that every person was killed, oftentimes listing men, women, children, and infants, which includes of course pregnant women and their fetuses. These mass exterminations represent God's punishment of his people for disobedience or his rewarding of the Israelites for obeying him by destroying their enemies. Moreover, every event reported in the Bible is an expression of God's supreme will, because he is an omnipotent being and thus is the author of human history.

- All the people of Zepath were massacred (Judges 1:17).
- The entire population of Bethel was slaughtered (Judges 1:25).
- King Jabin and all his people were destroyed (Judges 4:23–24).
- Abimelech captured Shechem, killed its people, and destroyed the city (Judges 9:45).

- Jephthah slaughtered Ammonites in twenty cities (Judges 11:32–33).
- All the people of Laish were killed and the city was burned to the ground (Judges 18:27).
- The Israelite army slaughtered the entire tribe of Benjamin, including men, women, and children (Judges 20:48).
- The Israelite army killed all the men, married women, and children of Jabesh-Gilead (Judges 21:10–14).
- Saul's army completely destroyed the entire Amalek nation, killing all men, women, and little children (1 Samuel 15:1–8).
- Dopeg the Edomite killed eighty-five priests and their families, including men, women, children, and babies (1 Samuel 22:18–19).
- David and his men killed every person in the villages of the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites (1 Samuel 27:8–9).
- David and his men massacred all the Amalekites, except 400 young men who escaped on camels (1 Samuel 30:17).
- The Philistines slaughtered the Israelites on Mount Gilboa (1 Samuel 31:1–6).
- Baasha killed all the descendants of Jeroboam (1 Kings 15:29).
- Zimri killed the entire royal family, as well as distant relatives and friends (1 Kings 16:11).
- King Menahem slaughtered the entire population of Tiphshah (Tappuah) and the surrounding area and ripped open the pregnant women (2 Kings 15:16).
- God's chosen people were completely destroyed for worshipping other gods and consulting fortune tellers (2 Kings 17:19–20).
- King Manasseh murdered great numbers of innocent people: Jerusalem was filled with the bodies of his victims (2 Kings 21:16).
- Enemy armies destroyed the nation of Judah because of the many sins of King Manasseh (2 Kings 24:2–4).
- Nebuchadnezzar slaughtered the residents of Jerusalem and destroyed the city (2 Chronicles 36:17–20).

The third category of biblical evidence addressing abortion, promised retribution for disobedience, subsumes a variety of situations and violations that come in good part from the prophetic literature. Several of the items included here derive from a scholarly investigation by Gene Kasmar, *Why . . . The Brooklyn Center High School Bible Challenge* (1995). His work is gratefully acknowledged.

- If a man accidentally injures a pregnant woman causing her to abort the fetus, he must financially compensate the woman's husband. But if the woman dies, the man may be executed (Exodus 21:22–25). This suggests that the fetus is regarded as property, not as a person.
- If a man accuses his wife of adultery, she must submit to a priestly purity test that will cause her to abort the fetus if she is guilty (Numbers 5:11–31). This suggests that the fetus does not possess a right to life.
- For worshipping idols, God declared that not one of his people would live, not a man, woman, or child, not even babies

in arms (Jeremiah 44:7–8).

- For worshipping other gods, Israel's children will die at birth, or perish in the womb, or never even be conceived (Hosea 9:10–12). Again, God will punish the Israelites by destroying their unborn children.
- For rebelling against God, Samaria's people will be killed, her babies dashed to death against the ground, and her pregnant women ripped open with a sword (Hosea 13:16).
- God enumerated his punishments (curses) for disobedience, including "cursed shall be the fruit of the body" (known as the curse of barren wombs) (Deuteronomy 28:18).
- God was petitioned to punish enemies by aborting their unborn children: "Their fruit shalt thou destroy from the earth" (Psalms 21:10).
- Isaiah prophesied doom for Babylon, including the murder of unborn children: "They will have no pity on the fruit of the womb" (Isaiah 13:18).
- Jesus did not express any special concern for unborn children during the anticipated end times: "Woe to pregnant women and those who are nursing" (Matthew 24:19) and "Blessed are the barren wombs that never bore and breasts that never nursed" (Luke 23:29).

The word *abortion* does not appear in most English versions of the Bible. However, the Hebrew word *shakol*, which means aborting or miscarriage and is translated as *barren, loss, or bereave*, is found in a half-dozen verses (Exodus 23:26; Leviticus 26:22; Isaiah 47:8–9; Jeremiah 15:7; Ezekiel 5:17; Hosea 9:14). In no case is the practice of abortion prohibited or condemned, and it is often described as God's ordained punishment.

The overwhelming evidence indicates that the god of the Bible does not oppose abortion. If he does, why didn't he just say so? Why didn't he authorize his spokesmen Moses, Jesus, and Paul to address the subject? Nor is there any support for the claim that fetuses possess a God-given right to life or that there is a biblical basis for assertions about the "sanctity of life." Anti-abortion Christians have no legitimate justification for usurping God's supreme authority in these matters. When all his scores of homicidal rampages are tallied, the god of the Bible is clearly the single greatest murderer of unborn children and the preeminent mass murderer of living people in all human history.

In conclusion, defenders of reproductive freedom should not allow the claims of biblical support for anti-abortion dogma to go unchallenged. Pro-choice advocates must confront the Christian "pro-lifers" on the untruthfulness of their assertions about God's opposition to abortion. Moreover, we know that God causes *all* abortions, because he is omnipotent and therefore causes everything. Lastly, the right of religious refusal by anti-abortion health professionals does not supersede the right of women to make reproductive decisions in accordance with *their* religious and moral convictions. Abortion rights supporters should insist that this principle be respected.

Brian Bolton is a retired psychologist living in Georgetown, Texas.