

THE BIBLE, PERSONHOOD, AND ABORTION

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Since the infamous 1973 cases of *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* in which the U. S. Supreme Court in effect prohibited states from outlawing abortion, there have been over 60 million abortions performed in the United States.¹ That is more than 3,652 abortions every day for 45 years with more being done each minute. The leading reasons given by women for having an abortion are (a) having a baby would interfere with work, school, or other responsibilities, (b) they cannot afford a child, and (c) they do not want to be a single parent or are having problems with their husband or partner.²

Some Christians believe there is no moral authority to oppose abortions obtained at some undefined "early stage" of pregnancy. They recognize that God condemns the killing of human beings without moral justification (e.g., Ex. 20:13; Lev. 24:17; Deut. 5:17; Mat. 19:18; Rom. 13:9), but they believe Scripture is unclear about whether an embryo or early fetus is a person and thus is unclear about whether God opposes the willful destruction of it. According to this view, the most one can say is that an early-stage abortion *may be* wrong, which is considered inadequate warrant for opposing the practice, for telling others that performing or obtaining an abortion is sinful.

I contend Scripture is sufficiently clear about the sinfulness of all abortions³ to preclude agnosticism about those performed in early stages of pregnancy. If that is correct, remaining silent or equivocating about the immorality of any abortion is disloyal to God and unloving toward both the helpless victims who are being killed and the perpetrators who are denied the benefit of one's discouragement from sin. Little, if any, that I say here is new, but I hope my packaging of the information will be helpful.

Persons in the Womb

Scripture indicates clearly there is a continuity of person between a human after birth and his or her pre-birth existence in the womb. Consider the following:

- Genesis 25:22a says of the twins Rebekah was carrying, "The *children* struggled together *within her*." They are called children (*bānîm*), the normal word for descendants that have been born, even though they are still in the womb. They are not some separate or distinct entity.

¹ The number as of 2017, based on the numbers reported by the Guttmacher Institute from 1973-2014 with projections for 2015-2017, is 60,069,971. See "[Abortion statistics: United States Data and Trends](#)." For a powerful auditory representation of the magnitude of this number, listen to Peter Heck's "[The Sound of Abortion](#)."

² See the Guttmacher Institute's "[Reasons U. S. Women Have Abortions](#)," especially [Table 3](#).

³ On rare occasions, babies need to be delivered prematurely to save the life of the mother, and sometimes they die as a result, but it is never necessary to kill them intentionally, to abort them, to save the life of the mother. Abortion is not a medical treatment.

- Exodus 21:22 describes a situation in which men are fighting and hit a pregnant woman "so that her *children* come out."⁴ The word for children here (*yēladim*) is commonly used for young, born children but may refer to adolescents and sometimes even young adults. Again, they are children when in the womb just like after their birth.
- In the despair of his suffering, Job asks God in Job 10:18a, "Why did you bring *me out from the womb*?" It was Job (me) who was in the womb not someone else or some nonpersonal entity.
- In speaking of his response to the complaints of his servants, Job says in Job 31:15, "Did not he who made *me in the womb* make him? And did not one fashion *us in the womb*?" It was Job (me) who was made by God in the womb, as were his servants.
- In Isa. 49:5a the Servant of Yahweh, widely understood to be the Lord Jesus Christ, says, "And now the LORD says, he who formed *me from the womb* to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him." It was he, the Servant, who was formed by God in the womb.⁵
- In Jer. 1:5 God says to the prophet, "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." God in his omniscience foreknew Jeremiah and his calling before he formed him in the womb, but the fact remains that he formed him, Jeremiah, in the womb.
- The point is confirmed in Jer. 20:16-18 where the prophet cries in despair, "Let that man be like the cities that the LORD overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill *me in the womb*; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great. Why did *I come out from the womb* to see

⁴ The interpretation of Exodus 21:22-25 is disputed, but its most probable interpretation confirms that a fetus is fully human. The text regulates the case of a pregnant woman who intervenes in a fight between two men and is struck so as to give birth prematurely. If both she and the child survive the experience without injury, "[t]he only compensation allowed, . . . as sanctioned and approved by the judges, is the husband's request for a fine because of the scare that this premature birth has brought to that household." Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *What Does the Lord Require?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 114. But if she or the child sustains an injury, the law of *lex talionis* comes into effect. Thus, "taking the life of a human fetus is considered homicide, just as is taking the life of the mother." Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 497. For detailed support of this interpretation, see Jack W. Cottrell, "Abortion and the Mosaic Law," *Christianity Today* 17 (March 16, 1973): 6-9; H. Wayne House, "Miscarriage or Premature Birth: Additional Thoughts on Exodus 21:22-25," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1978): 105-123; Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 247-248; John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 323-324; James K. Hoffmeier, "Abortion and the Old Testament Law" in James K. Hoffmeier, ed., *Abortion: A Christian Understanding and Response* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 57-62; Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 79-80; John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 64-65; Donal P. O'Mathuna, "Bodily Injuries, Murder, Manslaughter" in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Barker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 93-94; Davidson, 493-497; and Kaiser, 112-114.

⁵ NEB, REB, NRS, NJB, and NIV specify that the expression refers to a prenatal formation ("in the womb").

toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?" It was Jeremiah (me) who was not killed in the womb and who (I) came out of the womb.

- Hosea 12:3 declares of Jacob, "*In the womb he* took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God." He, Jacob, existed in the womb before he was born.
- John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit while in Elizabeth's womb (Lk. 1:15),⁶ an experience that elsewhere in Scripture is reserved exclusively for persons (Ex. 31:3, 35:31; Mic. 3:8; Lk. 1:41, 1:67; Acts 2:4, 4:8, 4:31, 9:17-18, 13:9, 13:52; Eph. 5:18), and he is described *in utero* as a "baby" (Lk. 1:41, 44), the same word (*brephos*) that is used for newborns and infants (e.g., Lk. 2:12).

Despite this revealed continuity of person between a human after birth and his or her pre-birth existence in the womb, proponents of an early-stage exception to the sinfulness of abortion point out that the above texts do not specify *when* during pregnancy personhood begins. This, they argue, leaves room for the belief that the individual organism whose life begins at conception does not become a person whose destruction God opposes until some later undefined time in the pregnancy. But leaving room for a belief is different from justifying it.

I am aware of no Scripture that establishes the proposed delay in personhood,⁷ nor am I aware of any nonarbitrary principle by which one can deny personhood to the earliest stage of human life while accepting the continuity of personhood across all the developmental stages of life after birth. As I was once a newborn, an infant, a toddler, a child, an adolescent, and a young adult, so I was once an embryo and a fetus.⁸ They were all me – not just a potential me – at different sizes, locations, levels of development, and degrees of dependency. Given the acceptance of post-birth continuity of personhood through these differences, the denial of personhood *in utero* must be demonstrated; it cannot simply be assumed and then clung to on the

⁶ The John Nolland states in *Luke 1-9:20*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 31, "The expression could mean 'from birth' or even 'prenatally.' The ετι ('even'; cf. Isa 48:8) as well as Luke 1:41, 44 indicates the latter." Darrell Bock states in *Luke 1:1-9:50*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 86:

Some discussion exists whether filling "from the mother's womb" means "from birth" (Isa. 48:8; Ps. 22:10 [22:11 MT]; Plummer 1896: 14) or "while still in the womb" (Judg. 13:3-5, 7; 16:17; Isa. 44:2; Marshall 1978: 58; R. Brown 1977: 261; Fitzmyer 1981: 326). Luke 1:41, with the testimony of the kicking fetus in the womb, argues for the rendering "while still in the womb." Elizabeth's testimony in that scene makes clear that John performs as a "witness" before his birth.

⁷ Adam was not a product of human procreation, was not conceived in a woman, but even in his unique case he was a person from the moment he was alive, the moment God breathed life into his inanimate body. He thus provides no support for the claim that a living human conceptus is not a person. The statement in Lev. 17:11 that "the life of the flesh is in the blood" does not speak of personhood but of life. The animals referred to require blood to continue living, but that is not true of early embryos, which are not addressed in the text. They are alive without their own blood supply, as is evident in their growth and development, and will continue to live until they die. Ecclesiastes 11:5 is not relevant. As the Masoretic text, which is supported by the LXX and Vulgate, is most commonly rendered, the verse speaks of the mystery of the path of the wind/spirit and how the bones or body are formed in a womb (e.g., KJV, ERV, ASV, NAS, NKJV, NJB, NASU, NET, NIV, CSB). It says nothing about delayed personhood.

⁸ See, e.g., Alexander Pruss, "I Was Once a Fetus: That Is Why Abortion Is Wrong" in Stephen Napier, ed., *Persons, Moral Worth, and Embryos* (New York: Springer, 2011), 19-42.

basis it has not been proven impossible.⁹ But in any event, other biblical texts make clear that personhood does indeed extend back to the earliest stages of development, including conception, which is dispositive for the Christian.

Persons at the Earliest Stages of Development

Some poetic texts reveal that the personhood of an adult extends back to very early in the developmental process. Job says in Job 10:10-11: "Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh and knit me together with bones and sinews." The curdling of milk to produce cheese pictures the formation of the embryo, its coalescing into a solid,¹⁰ and he, Job, preexisted that solidification as it was he who was poured out like the milk that was curdled. He existed before he had skin and flesh, as he was the object that was clothed (*lābash*) with those things (see, e.g., Gen. 3:21), and he existed before he had bones and sinews, as he was connected together through the development of those things.

Speaking of God's having formed him, having intricately woven him in secret, David says in Ps. 139:16, "Your eyes saw my *gōlem*." This noun occurs only here in Scripture. It is related to the verb *gālam*, which means to wrap, roll, or fold up (2 Ki. 2:8), the result of which is a shapeless or poorly defined mass. *Gōlem* refers to the embryonic stage of human development, the time of relative formlessness before the physical features characteristic of humans have come into sharp relief. It is defined as "embryo" in the standard Hebrew lexicons¹¹ and theological

⁹ After reviewing various criteria of personhood put forth by several abortion advocates, Francis Beckwith concludes in *Politically Correct Death* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 110:

No doubt much more can be said about the problem of what constitutes personhood, but what is important in this immediate discussion is that we have seen that a functional definition of personhood is riddled with serious problems and that the pro-life advocate has been given no compelling reason to dispense with his belief that the unborn are persons, and hence, fully human. Furthermore, the arguments for the full personhood of the unborn are extremely strong.

Jason T. Eberl explains in "Defending the Argument from Potential" in Stephen Napier, ed., *Persons, Moral Worth, and Embryos* (New York: Springer, 2011), 263:

All that is required for something to be a person is for it to have an active potentiality to perform self-conscious rational operations. The actual performance of such operations is accidental to a person's existence. A developing embryo or fetus possesses an active potentiality for self-conscious rational thought, although it cannot yet actually think in such a manner. By contrast, sperm and ova do not have such an active potentiality, but rather merely a passive potentiality to become a person since each must undergo a change brought about by an extrinsic principle: sperm must be changed through union with an ovum and vice versa. This union transforms them into a substance with active potentialities for the definitive operations of personhood. Once this substantial change occurs, a person exists even if she is not actually exercising all of her definitive operations.

¹⁰ David Albert Jones says of this text in *The Soul of the Embryo* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 14, "[T]he formation of the embryo is likened to the curdling of milk to produce cheese. This analogy was also known elsewhere in the ancient world and occurs in the biological works of Aristotle. It is a vivid image for the condensing of the *golem* [embryo]. The embryo is then clothed with skin and flesh and knitted with bones and sinews."

¹¹ Koehler & Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 1:195 ("formless, embryo"); William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 61 ("formless thing, embryo"); Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 166 ("embryo").

dictionaries¹² and by many leading commentators.¹³ It is often rendered in English versions as "unformed substance" (ASV, RSV, NAS, NRSV, NASU, ESV), which conveys the incompleteness of formation. NIV renders it "unformed body," and NJB and CEB render it "embryo." The fact the Spirit reveals it was his, David's, embryo, David in his yet unformed state, corroborates the indication from Job that the identity of person extends to very early in the developmental process.

This understanding of embryonic life explains why David, though desperate to conceal his adultery, did not compel Bathsheba secretly to abort their illicit child when she came to him upon discovering she was pregnant (2 Samuel 11).¹⁴ He apparently judged that act, even at this early stage of the pregnancy, to be more heinous than having her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. Presumably the fact God is the champion of the weak and powerless (Ps. 12:5, 41:1, 72:1-4) weighed in his moral calculus.

The continuity of person from at least the first week of embryonic development is clear from the case of the Lord Jesus. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John, the Virgin Mary was informed by the angel Gabriel that she was going to conceive a son miraculously through the Holy Spirit, a son who would be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God, and who would reign over a never-ending kingdom (Lk. 1:26-35). She also was told about Elizabeth's pregnancy (Lk. 1:36). Mary responded, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38), and immediately after that exchange Luke reports that Mary "arose and went with haste" to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth in an unspecified town in the hill country of Judah (Lk. 1:39-40).¹⁵ This journey would have taken only a few days,¹⁶ so even if going "with haste" allows for a delay of two or three days, her arrival would have been within a week of the angel's announcement.¹⁷

When Mary arrived, she already was pregnant *with the Lord Jesus*, not some different or nonpersonal entity, even though he at that time was only in his first week of development. This is

¹² Victor Hamilton, "עֶרְוָה" in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 869 ("embryo, fetus"); R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:165 ("embryo").

¹³ See, e.g., John Goldingay, *Psalms*, BCOT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 3:635; Willem VanGemeren, "Psalms" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 5:962; Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 872; J. A. Motyer, *The Psalms* in G. J. Wenham et al., eds., *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 578; Carroll Stuhlmueller, "Psalms" in James L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 491; Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 249; and A. A. Anderson, *Psalms 73-150*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 910.

¹⁴ Abortion was practiced in the Ancient Near East long before David's time. See, e.g., Stephen D. Ricks, "Abortion in Antiquity" in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:31-35.

¹⁵ As explained in the note in NET, "The expression *In those days* is another general time reference, though the sense of the context is that the visit came shortly after Mary miraculously conceived and shortly after the announcement about Jesus." In context, the phrase properly can be rendered "At that time" (NIV), "At this time" (NAS, NASU), "About this time" (NEB), and "Soon afterwards" (REB).

¹⁶ See, e.g., James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 52.

¹⁷ The promptness of Mary's departure is confirmed by details of her visit to Elizabeth. Leon Morris states in *Luke*, rev. ed., TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 82: "Mary lost no time in paying a visit to her kinswoman. Gabriel visited her in Elizabeth's sixth month (36) and she returned home after a visit of about three months (56), apparently before the birth of John. She must therefore have set out almost immediately after the angel's visit."

clear from Elizabeth's Spirit-filled exclamation about Mary: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the *fruit of your womb!* And why is this granted to me that the *mother of my Lord* should come to me?" (Lk. 1:42-43). As David Garland notes, "Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth also acknowledges the lordship of the embryonic Jesus."¹⁸

The Lord's presence likewise is clear from John's leaping in Elizabeth's womb when Mary arrived. As explained in v. 44, it was this leaping that revealed to Elizabeth what she exclaimed in v. 43, that Mary was the mother of her Lord: "*For behold*, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." John, the prophesied and God-ordained herald of the Lord (Lk. 1:13-17), who was filled with the Spirit in Elizabeth's womb, was reacting to Jesus' presence; "[he] is seen as beginning his forerunner ministry by his response."¹⁹ And the Spirit-filled Elizabeth rightly interpreted that reaction as a sign that Mary was carrying the Lord. John Nolland observes, "While Elizabeth responds to the greeting, the unborn John responds directly to the presence of the unborn Jesus: Elizabeth's inspired blessing in v. 42 takes account of both. Elizabeth's words are a Spirit-inspired interpretation of the movement of her unborn child (v 44)."²⁰ Joel Green similarly remarks:

John, we have been told, would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth and anticipate the coming of the Lord (1:15-17). Here is the purpose of his prenatal experience of the Spirit, embodied in his joyful leaping: Even from the womb he prophesies, implicitly transferring the designation of 'Lord' to Mary's unborn baby, recognizing in this baby the eschatological coming of God.²¹

Persons at Conception

Luke 2:21 specifies, unsurprisingly, that Jesus' personhood extends all the way back to his conception. It states: "And at the end of eight days, when *he* was circumcised, *he* was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before *he* was conceived in the womb." The he who was circumcised and given the name Jesus is the he who was conceived in the womb. There is no gap between his conception and his personhood. Claiming the pronoun "he" is used only because the nonpersonal entity that was conceived would later become Jesus is special pleading that has no basis in the text or in the entire Bible. Indeed, if it was not the person Jesus who was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit, it is inexplicable why her conceiving is reported in Scripture (Mat. 1:20; Lk. 1:35, 2:21) but nothing is said of the alleged later coming of the person Jesus. That later coming would be a monumental event of salvation history, when God the Son became the man Jesus, so it makes no sense to insist it was ignored in favor of revelation about the conception of a nonperson.

No refuge can be found in the claim Jesus was unique in having his personhood extend back to his conception. Not only do Lk. 2:6-7 and 2:40 indicate that Jesus was ordinary in terms

¹⁸ David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 93.

¹⁹ Bock, 135.

²⁰ Nolland, 75.

²¹ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 95. See also, Bock, 138; Morris, 83; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 357-358; Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 82.

of his human development, other texts reveal that personhood begins at conception for those who are not God incarnate.

In Judg. 13:3 Manoah's barren wife is told by an angel that she will conceive and bear a son. She is told in v. 4 that because she is going to conceive and bear a son she must be careful not to drink wine or strong drink or eat anything unclean. The reason for that dietary restriction is given in v. 5: "*for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb*" (cf. v. 7) In other words, because the child will be a Nazirite from his conception²² – one who is prohibited from any fermented drink – she must abstain from consuming such drink during her pregnancy.²³ Daniel Block comments, "The divine messenger does not leave the woman to puzzle over the instructions or their rationale: from the moment of his conception the boy is to be recognized as a *nāzîr*, 'Nazirite,' of God."²⁴

In his suffering, Job says in Job 3:3, "Perish the day on which I was born and the night that said 'A male has been conceived.'"²⁵ "Job opens with an execration which announces the two figures he wishes to annihilate: the day of his birth and the night of his conception. . . . The night is portrayed as a mysterious soothsayer who announces the sex of the child in advance."²⁶ David Albert Jones observes, "The cursing of the day of birth, like the wish to have been miscarried, is an extreme expression of bitterness and is found in both Job and in the prophecies of

²² As Daniel Block notes in *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 403 (n. 232), the phrase "from the womb" is here "shorthand for 'from the time he is conceived in the womb.'" Mark J. Boda concurs in "Judges" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 1208 (n. 5): "As the narrative shows, the setting apart is from the point of conception, since Samson's mother is prohibited from drinking fermented liquids or eating unclean foods while carrying the child." Richard D. Nelson states in *Judges: A Critical and Rhetorical Commentary* (New York: T & T Clark, 2018), 240, "For Samson, however, the state of affairs is permanent *from the womb*, which is to say, from conception onward." See also, Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 87; David R. Hildebrand, "Samson" in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 310.

²³ The reminder to eat nothing unclean pursuant to Jewish dietary laws (Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14) is because of the special consecrated status of the Nazirite she was carrying. Barry Webb states in *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 352, "The implication is that Samson's mother should be *particularly* careful to observe the laws about unclean foods because of the holiness of the child she will carry within her."

²⁴ Block, 403.

²⁵ Translation is from Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 98. NKJV similarly states, "A male child is conceived." As J. Kühlwein states in "גבר" in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, eds., *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1:300, "*geber* can even mean 'male child' (Job 3:3)." Other English versions opt for "man child," "boy," and "man," but however the conceptus is described it clearly is Job, as the lament requires that identification. It was he who was conceived that night.

²⁶ Habel, 107. David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 82 states:

It has seemed an oddity to many that the day of his birth should be mentioned (v 3a) before the day of his conception (v 3b), and some have adopted the LXX rendering, "See, a boy," to make the second colon refer also to the time of birth, not conception. But it [is] easy to see how Job's mind is here working backwards from his own present state to the moment of his birth and then beyond that to the moment of his conception . . . The night is personified as "a mysterious soothsayer" (Habel), "busy with her spells" (Straham), making an announcement about the sex of the child just conceived . . . Like a messenger who brings bad tidings, night is cursed for the message it delivers, though it hardly is responsible.

Jeremiah. . . . However, Job goes further, also cursing the night on which he was conceived. The beginning of Job's existence is thus pushed back to conception."²⁷ Robert Alden likewise states:

Most conceptions occur at night. So in this verse Job cursed not only the day he emerged from his mother's womb but the night nine months earlier when the spark of his life was kindled in his parents' marriage bed. As in other places in this book (10:10-11) and elsewhere in the Bible (Ps 139:16; Jer 1:5), Job believed his personhood went back to his conception, not merely to his birth.²⁸

David declared in Ps. 51:5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother *conceive me*." However one interprets the sin associated with the conception, it cannot be missed that it was David (me) who was conceived. One who claims it was some nonpersonal entity that only later became David must provide evidence establishing that is what David meant. One cannot simply impose one's wishes on the text.

Hosea 2:4-5 declares, "Upon her *children* also I will have no mercy, because they are *children* of whoredom. For their mother has played the whore; she who *conceived them* has acted shamefully." Their metaphorical roles notwithstanding, the children who had been born and who were threatened to be shown no mercy are identified with the children their mother conceived. She conceived *them*, not some other or nonpersonal entities that only later became them.

In Song of Songs 3:4, the lead female character of the poem reports a dream about the man she loves. She says, "Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one whom my soul loves. I seized him and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house and into the room of her who *conceived me*." Again, it was the woman (me) who was conceived. Her identity goes back to that moment.

Luke 1:36 states, "And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also *conceived a son*, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren." John was a son from conception; he was not a nonperson for whom the label "son" would have no meaning.

Witness of Church History

The early church was unanimous in its condemnation of all abortions. They recognized from Scripture the sanctity of embryos and fetuses. As noted by Alexander Webster, "It is one of only several moral issues on which not one dissenting opinion has ever been expressed by the Church Fathers." He adds, "Even a cursory reading of the patristic literature reveals a relentless campaign against the inhuman sin of abortion."²⁹ For example, both the *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Christian writings from the late first or early second century, expressly denounce the practice of abortion. Bonifacio Honings states, "For all the Greek and Latin fathers, abortion

²⁷ David Albert Jones, 14.

²⁸ Robert L. Alden, *Job*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 73.

²⁹ Quoted in Terry Schlossberg and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Not My Own: Abortion and the Marks of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 4.

is morally a sin and legally a crime, because it involves the unjust killing of a human life that is, from its beginning, under the protection of the providential love of God."³⁰

This understanding was held by Christians throughout history. David Albert Jones declares at the end of his study:

The present enquiry has demonstrated the remarkable consistency in Christian attitudes to early human life. We saw in Chapter 5 that, far from being a new teaching, the claim that 'life must be protected with the utmost care from conception' (*Gaudium et Spes 51*) represents the teaching of the Early Church, of the Greek East and the Latin West. It was not altered in its fundamentals by the collapse of the Roman empire or the barbarian invasions of the Dark Ages. As seen in Chapters 10, 11 and 12, it remained substantially unchanged through the Renaissance, the Reformation, the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment.³¹

Doubt Does Not Justify Silence

I think Scripture is clear that personhood goes back to conception, but even if one has doubts about that conclusion certainly the evidence presented makes it a significant possibility. It is not some eccentric interpretation that simply can be ignored. The fact there is, at the very least, a significant chance God has revealed that embryos are persons is sufficient warrant for a Christian to oppose all abortions. In other words, it is not true that the most one can say in such a case is that an early-stage abortion *may be* wrong. One can and should say that obtaining such an abortion *is* wrong because, barring a justification not relevant to abortion, it is immoral to take an action that certainly will destroy what may be an innocent person.

Imagine a farmer has legal permission to do a controlled burn on his property. You have reason to believe children may be in the burn area in an underground fort. It would not be moral to remain silent about that possibility simply because you were unsure the children were there. And if you told the farmer and he decided to proceed with the burn anyway, you would be justified in condemning that decision as a callous disregard of human life based on the possibility of the children's presence. The only moral choice where one is uncertain about the personhood of what one's action will destroy is to refrain from the action. So the alleged uncertainty about the personhood of an embryo does not deny one moral authority to oppose early-stage abortions or justify being indifferent toward them.

³⁰ Bonifacio Honings, "Abortion" in Angelo Di Berardino, ed., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 1:11.

³¹ Jones, 244. "The constant and consistent Christian tradition from the Early Church to the nineteenth century repudiated abortion at any stage of pregnancy" (Jones, 74). The identification in the medieval Western church of "ensoulment" with "formation," generally set at around 40 days, was rooted in the LXX's incorrect rendering of Ex. 21:22-25 and Aristotle's mistaken biology. See, Jones, 47-48, 117-119, 123; Megan Best, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2012), 46-47. The distinction between "formed" and "unformed" was eliminated by Pope Pius IX in 1869 (Jones, 72). But, as indicated, the identification of "ensoulment" with "formation" did not make early abortions acceptable. They remained universally condemned as something analogous to homicide (Jones, 70-72). "Abortion at any stage of pregnancy, excepting certain procedures undertaken to save the mother's life was always regarded as mortal sin" (Jones, 73).

Lack of Personhood Is Not Dispositive

God is the giver of life (Gen. 2:7; Job 33:4; Ps. 36:9; Eccles. 12:7; Acts 17:25; 1 Tim. 6:13), and since the time of Adam and Eve he has linked his provision of that gift to the physical act of procreation (Prov. 23:22), more specifically to the fertilization of an ovum. Under the delayed-personhood theory, the individual human organism to which God gives life at conception is a nonperson, something outside of his care and protection, so until that organism manifests whatever qualities or properties are deemed necessary for personhood one is free to kill it without fear of God's disapproval.

The assertion that God is indifferent toward the living human organism he has created through the instrument of its parents until it matures to a certain point must be demonstrated rather than assumed. What justifies restricting his valuing of this life to some later developmental stage when he has from the beginning imbued it with all that was required to develop into a fully mature human being? From that first cell, it is a human possessed of the potential to develop continuously through fetalhood, infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, so why assume God is indifferent toward it? There is nothing in Scripture to support such an idea, which ought to matter to a Christian.

As noted above, the medieval Western church, which coupled "ensoulment" with "formation" at around 40 days, recognized the embryo was from conception under the protection of the providential love of God so that its deliberate destruction at any time was a mortal sin. In that vein, the 20th-century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared:

Destruction of the embryo in the mother's womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon this nascent life. To raise the question whether we are here concerned already with a human being or not is merely to confuse the issue. The simple fact is that God certainly intended to create a human being and that this nascent human being has been deliberately deprived of his life. And that is nothing but murder. A great many motives may lead to an action of this kind . . . but they cannot in any way alter the fact of murder.³²

Lack of Express Condemnation

The fact Scripture does not expressly condemn abortion³³ does not support an early-stage exception to the sinfulness of abortion. Indeed, that objection proves too much as it would justify abortion at any time not only during the early stage of pregnancy. One must be careful in assuming that God must reveal truths with the kind of directness one would prefer and then allowing that assumption to blind one to the power of the less direct evidence he has provided. The truth about the Trinity illustrates the point.

I suppose abortion is not addressed more directly in Scripture for the same reason there is no express command against non-sacrificial infanticide or cannibalism; it would have been

³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 174.

³³ Though some believe it is included in the condemnations of *pharmakeia* ("sorcery") and *pharmakos* ("sorcerer") in Gal. 5:20, Rev. 21:8, and Rev. 22:15.

exceedingly rare among Israelites. David Albert Jones remarks, "For the Jewish people procreation was both a divine blessing and divine commandment. There is no evidence that the practices of infanticide and abortion, widespread among their pagan contemporaries, were prevalent among Jews in the ancient world."³⁴ Scott Klusendorf writes:

Germain Grisez sums things up nicely: Among a Hebrew people who saw children as a gift and barrenness as a curse, it was virtually unthinkable that any woman from that culture would 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.³⁵

Conclusion

God has revealed in Scripture that there is a continuity of person between a human after birth and his or her pre-birth existence in the womb. He also has revealed that this continuity extends all the way back to the moment of conception, to the beginning of the new life, the new human being. Therefore, all abortions are sinful because they are the deliberate killing of a person contrary to God's command (e.g., Ex. 20:13; Lev. 24:17; Deut. 5:17; Mat. 19:18; Rom. 13:9).

Even if one were unconvinced about the personhood of an embryo or early fetus, the refusal to apply that label does not alter the fact it is a living organism that God has created and imbued with all that is required to develop into a fully mature human being. It is a human life at its beginning, a life full of potential. The claim that God is indifferent toward it requires biblical justification, and there is none.

Finally, I urge those in Christ not to transform doubt about the personhood of an embryo or early fetus into doubt about the immorality of an early-stage abortion. Given there is, at the very least, a significant chance God has revealed that embryos are persons, all abortions are immoral because, barring a justification not relevant to abortion, it is immoral to take any action that certainly will destroy what may be an innocent person.

³⁴ Jones, 56.

³⁵ Scott Klusendorf, "[Does the Bible's Silence Justify Abortion?](#)" He cites Germain Grisez, *Abortion: the Myths, the Realities, and the Argument* (New York: Corpus Books, 1970), 123-127.