

Why the Bible is Silent About Abortion

The Bible is silent about abortion because in the biblical world human life begins at birth.

Genesis 2: 7 says: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” The biology of pregnancy is that the developing human being is nourished from the mother’s body and breaths the breath of the mother until birth. Then, the born individual breathes the breath of life for themselves. The breath is life. When the Bible describes the deaths of both animals and humankind who did not find refuge in Noah’s ark, it says: “All in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, all that was on the dry land died.” (Genesis 7:22) In Ezekiel, in the Valley of Dry Bones, God commands the prophet to prophesy to the breath: “Thus says the Lord God: ‘Come from the four winds, O breath and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’” (Ezekiel 37:9)

“Writing in his book – *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* – John M. Riddle reports that abortifacients and herbal recipes to prevent pregnancy were known in the ancient Jewish world. One Talmudic interpretation held that the command to be “fruitful and multiply” only applied to men. “Women who must suffer pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing, are excused by God from the command to be fruitful” (19).

Riddle tells the story of Judith, the wife of Rabbi Hiyya, who, after a difficult childbirth, drank a substance to cause her to be barren. She did this after the rabbi told her that women were not commanded to propagate the race. However, rabbinic opinion, reflecting the ancient world within which it existed, ranged from the idea that ensoulment happened at quickening, when the developing human begins detectable movement, to the idea of ensoulment at birth. The biblical writers either thought the matter of contraception and abortion was settled, or that it was not an issue worth writing or teaching about.

Exodus 20:13, one of the Ten Commandments says: “You shall not commit murder (unjustified, deliberate homicide)” (Amplified Bible) If men fight and cause a pregnant woman to give birth prematurely and harm follows, then the punishment is life for life. (Exodus 21:23) This does not

mean that a pregnant woman has an obligation to carry a pregnancy to term. In Numbers 5, there is a formula to determine whether or not a woman has been unfaithful to her husband. If she has been unfaithful, her belly will swell and she would be unable to bear children. It is unclear whether or not this is a formula for abortion. Still, the Bible is silent about abortion.

What we do see is consent from the woman to become pregnant. When an angel comes to Mary, the mother of Jesus, tells her that she is a highly favored one of God, that she will conceive a son and call his name Jesus, that she will become pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit, she says yes. "Then Mary said, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her." (Luke 1:38) The Bible is a book that tells stories of murder, rape, war, and genocide. They are known as the texts of terror. However, I do not know of any texts that describe forced pregnancy.

Anti-choice thinkers base their biblical argument against abortion on the commandment that says: "Thou shall not kill." They say that the developing human is formed in the womb by God and carries the image of God, therefore is innocent life that ought to be protected by the laws of the state. They do not consider the issue of personhood or ensoulment. They do not consider the stress of pregnancy or the pain of childbirth on the mother. They say that since God names certain individuals before birth, that this is evidence that God gives personhood to an individual before birth.

If we go to the scriptures regarding God's knowledge of the individual before birth, we would have to extend that to knowledge even before conception. Jeremiah 1:4-5 says: Then the word of the LORD came to me saying: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you, I ordained you a prophet to the nations." This also means that God knew the woman who would carry this individual, and knew that she, like Mary, the mother of Jesus, would give her consent. When the Bible speaks of the womb, it is, more often than not, speaking of from the womb. It is speaking of an individual's purpose for being from the

beginning of their lives, from birth. It sometimes says that a person has been a transgressor from the womb. (Isaiah 48:8.)

While the Bible is silent about contraception and about abortion, it is not silent about the individual and community obligation to care for the poor. There is a prohibition on charging interest on loans to the poor. When harvesting fields, there is an instruction to leave some for the poor and for the stranger. During the Jubilee years, every 50 years, servants were released. Debts were cancelled every seven years. There are instructions to pay the poor their wages daily. There are holidays where people give gifts to each other and to the poor. The tithe is to be shared with the Levite, “and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.” (Deuteronomy 14:29) In Malachi, the prophet accuses those who do not bring the tithes and offering to the storehouse of robbing God. “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, And try Me now in this Says the LORD of hosts, ‘If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it.’” (Malachi 3:10)

The Bible says that God sides with the poor. S/he hears their cries and delivers them from their afflictions. God commands justice for the fatherless and the oppressed. The good person gives to the poor, the wicked oppresses them. God has no patience for religious ritual and fasts that only demonstrate personal affliction. God says:

Is this not the fast that I have chosen:

To loose the bonds of wickedness

To undo the heavy burdens,

To let the oppressed go free

And that you break every yoke?

Is it not that you share your bread with the hungry,

And that you bring to your house the

Poor who are cast out;
When you see the naked, that you cover him,
And not hide yourself from your own flesh?
(Isaiah 58 6-7)

The prophet Amos with the theme that describes what is important to God.

I hate, I despise your feast days,
And I do not savor your sacred
assemblies.
Though you offer Me burnt offerings
and your grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Nor will I regard your fattened peace
offerings.
Take away from Me the noise of your songs.
For I will not hear the melody of your
stringed instruments.
But let justice run down like water,
And righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5: 21-24)

In the New Testament, Jesus is a socialist. Jesus is a teacher who is not teaching religion as much as he is teaching a way of life, a way of being in the world. The religious life of the community is not separate from its social, economic, and political life. Jesus teaches a value system. In the Sermon on the Mount, he teaches the community to look past the moment to the "shall" of God. The poor in spirit shall have the kingdom of heaven. The mourners shall be comforted; the meek shall inherit the earth; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be filled. The merciful shall obtain mercy; the pure in heart shall see God; the peacemakers shall be known as the children of God; those who are persecuted for

righteousness' sake shall be rewarded. In short, the blessed life is not bought and paid for with money.

Jesus taught that you ought to give to those who asks and do not turn away someone who would borrow from you. In the model prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray that God gives us our daily bread this day, and to pray that our debts are forgiven as we are willing to forgive the debts of those who owe us. This is about economics. It is about money.

Jesus teaches that we cannot serve both God and Mammon, the god of money. Jesus warns against laying up treasures that can rot and rust and be stolen, but rather lay up treasures in heaven. Here heaven is very likely the transcendence of community. Jesus teaches his disciples to "judge not." He teaches the Golden Rule: "*whatsoever* you want people to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 5:12)

In Matthew 25, Jesus teaches that nations will be judged according to how they take care of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, those who are sick, and prisoners. He says "as you have done to the least of these, you have done unto me." In Mark 10:21 Jesus tells the rich young man to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, then come to follow him. This is where Jesus defines what it means to have treasures in heaven. The rich young man does not give up his riches to follow Jesus. Here Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus gives the primary purpose of his ministry when he reads from the book of Isaiah. His purpose is to preach good news to the poor, heal the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to free the oppressed, and to "proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD." (Isaiah 61:1-2) The acceptable year of the LORD is the year when debts are forgiven. Again, it is a time of economic adjustment, so that people are not forever shackled by debt.

Also in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches generosity. “For the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.” (Luke 6:38) Jesus tells the story of the rich fool who built larger buildings to store his wealth when God said to him that he would die that very night. (Luke 12:16-20) Jesus teaches later in this same chapter that to whom much is given, much shall be required. (Luke 12:48) In the Gospel of John, after the resurrection, Jesus tells Peter to feed his sheep to demonstrate his love.

Some people deny that Jesus is a socialist thinker because they say he is not talking about the role of government. Jesus did not have power to make law inside the Roman Empire. However, he did have the power to teach people a better way to live with one another that included an economics of care and generosity that would have left them less vulnerable to the economic oppression of empire. It was a communal value system, a socialist value system.

The biblical teaching regarding the poor is relevant to the abortion debate because the majority of women who seek abortions are under 30-years-old, have given birth at least once and are low income. (gutmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states) This means that many women have abortions because they cannot afford to have another child. If our society took proper care of the poor, perhaps this would lead to fewer abortions. If we followed the teaching of Jesus and did not judge women, for whatever choice they make regarding whether or not to carry pregnancy to term, perhaps there would be fewer abortions. If we refused to condemn women for their sexual choices, rather than to throw stones at those who violate society’s norm, perhaps there would be fewer abortions. Jesus did not judge or condemn. He taught a kingdom of heaven ethics that values people over money.

In our current politics, the political party that calls itself pro-life is also the party that is quick to denounce government spending to help the least among us as socialism. In our current debate about human infrastructure, the Republican party is completely missing in action while the progressive and moderate wings of the Democratic party haggle over how much money to

spend on such things as paid family leave, universal pre-kindergarten, and a child tax credit. All these things would help families with children.

For many politicians and anti-abortion forces, the unborn child has become a fetish. They are devoted to the unborn individual over the human rights of the pregnant person. Their devotion to the unborn is a perceived holiness in and of itself while they do not value families with children. The Bible is silent about abortion because life begins at birth when God breaths the breath of life into the nostrils of the human and the human becomes a living soul. Once an individual is born, the society has an obligation to see to the needs of that person who bears the image and the likeness of God. When we value human beings over money, when we value the born over the idolatry of the unborn, we will do our part to bring the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.