

# ABORTION, SCRIPTURES CONCEIVABLY PERTINENT TO THE ISSUE

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More than any other current issue in society & church, abortion is ideologically embattled & emotionally charged. Accordingly, it's the hardest topic on which to prepare a "testimonium" (selection of Bible passages), for the very choosing is interpreting: it's saying "Look at this [& not that]"--which is in the direction of saying "Look at it this way." To correct for the natural tendency to list only the most important texts (meaning, most supportive of my position), I've sought to include all conceivably pertinent scriptures--conceivable by my (yes, no avoiding the subjective element) as I've observed the references used in illumining & buttressing the various schools of thought on "Human Beginnings: Deciding About Life in the Presence of God"-- the theme of Craigville VI Theological Colloquy, for which I'm preparing this listing....Also in my concern to be fair & evenhanded, I've (1) kept commentary to a minimum & (2) organized the material in biblical order rather than under "the basic principles" of agreement & disagreement in our baseline document, the Roman Catholic / Presbyterian-Reformed Consultation's "Ethics and the Search for Christian Unity: A Statement on Abortion."

**Genesis**--is about the beginning of people (1-11) & the people (12-50), with the beginning of everything else thrown in for context (1<sup>1-25</sup> 25<sup>f</sup>)--the Beginner of all being in charge of all, & subcharging humanity with authority/responsibility vis-a-vis some (the contextual meaning of "image & likeness" in 1<sup>26-28</sup>). In our document, "The Statement on Abortion" makes no specific use of the Bible other than "image and likeness" (58), which it declares to be "the transcendent basis for respect for human life." The phrase (1) is capacious enough for the full range of meanings in play, an ark for all the animals; (2) has the virtue of combining vividness with vagueness (thus having more rhetorical than philosophical value); (3) has a rich hermeneutical-theological history that has a right to be heard, & we've a duty to hear it, for the Spirit speaks through the whole tradition, though fundamentally through Scripture. We are not divine, but "like" God functionally & (within the imprecision of God's being in/visible) formally, analogous to Seth's being "like" Adam (5<sup>1-3</sup>). The only other OT ref. is 9<sup>5f</sup> (sanctions against cannibalism, animals eating people, & murder), where our Godlikeness signals our special value. (Godliness is something else: "Be holy, for I am holy." We are not holy from being made, in some sense[s], like God.)....Modern ideas piggybacking on "image (and likeness)" are personality (Augustine, the precursor) & individuality (the Enlightenment's idea of human dignity: essential, not [as the Bible] relational to God). ....The NT transposes "image" from humanity to Christ, "almost completely obliterating" (IDB) the former. The OT "image" defines & commissions us: the NT "Image" models God & is transforming us into the divine likeness (given redemptively, not creationally, in continuity with OT "Be holy, for I am holy")....OT & NT: Not what we are, but Whom we are like & are called to become more like. Always the Center is the center....For an exposition of "image" without use of the word, see Ps.8.... When the two creation stories are read canonically, as one story, the fellowship-with-God theme of the earlier (2<sup>4b-3</sup>, which doesn't have "image" or "likeness") colors the reading of the later's "image and likeness." The earlier story's concern is with humanity's betrayal of God & the resulting damaged, anti-covenantal relations with God, among human beings, with other creatures, and with the earth itself. For the canonical reading, see our document's "The Reformed Commentary: The Image of God," 26: "While existence may be determined by nature, human life is found in relationship with God and with fellow humanity....in God's image, e.g., knowledge, righteousness, holiness, rationality, morality, spirituality, immortality, dominion over creation, etc., but the basic concept of image-bearing is reflexion, i.e., that to be human is to experience dialogue with God." But whatever content & weight we give to *imago Dei*, Genesis (1<sup>26</sup> 2<sup>7</sup> 3<sup>19</sup> 6<sup>17</sup> 7<sup>15</sup>) teaches we're a special "flesh," marked out from among the creatures for special service through a special relationship with God toward a special destiny....3<sup>5</sup> childbirth as redemptive 9<sup>2-6</sup> the fetus as human 15<sup>1-5</sup> Abraham's offspring to inherit the promise 25<sup>21,23</sup> 33<sup>5</sup>. NB: Here & throughout, my notes are telling you how some think of particular texts as "pertinent" to abortion. You personally may find "INconceivable," impossibly far-fetched, the idea that 9<sup>2-6</sup> proves "the fetus is human"; but you should be aware that for some Bible-readers, that idea is signaled by "image" in this passage. My job in this Thinksheet does not include giving you my personal opinions; it's rather (1) to present abortion-issue-used scriptures (2) with a few comments, some critical-biblical & some connectional (where it seems appropriate to note the bridging ideas).

\*God's breath makes us "living-breath-self-person" (nephesh haya): not before inhaling, not after our last exhalation.

**Exodus**--has the Bible's only specific reference to abortion: a husband demands a fine (court-adjudicated) of a man who caused an abortion by accidentally striking the plaintiff's wife (21<sup>22</sup>)--the situation being much more serious if the woman herself is hurt (v.23). While we must be cautious about arguing from silence, it would be strange--in a book of so many laws, regulations, rules, judgments, punishments as the Bible--if abortion, being proscribed, were not condemned. It seems abortion was (EJR) "generally unknown among the Jews."....1<sup>15-22</sup>: Pharaoh commanded not abortion but infanticide; the Israelite women, instead of aborting, variously evaded infanticide. "Shed not innocent blood": 23<sup>7</sup>....20<sup>13</sup> (Dt.5<sup>17</sup>; cf. Mt.5<sup>21</sup> 19<sup>18</sup> Ro.1<sup>29</sup> Rev.21<sup>8</sup> 22<sup>15</sup>). Advocates of consistent pro-life could read "Thou shalt not kill" (moral term) instead of "murder" (legal term, in the codical context of the Decalog, the core code of a people practicing, eg, capital punishment [eg, Gn.9<sup>6</sup>]). Pro-lifers are entitled to call abortion murder in the proleptic sense: they intend legislation against it....23<sup>26</sup> God's promise of longevity without childlessness or miscarriage (in line with the general OT view that barrenness is a curse, fertility a blessing, pregnancy a sign of God's favor [marriages & babies made in heaven]).

**Leviticus**--20<sup>1-17</sup> the Decalog. On no murder (v.13), remember Gn.9<sup>5f</sup> (God will kill an animal that eats somebody; nobody made in God's image is to be killed by any animal or human being, & murderers will get capital punishment not by God but by people). V.5: Abortion would evade divine punishment "down to the third and fourth generation."

**Deuteronomy**--30<sup>19</sup> "the choice between life and death, between God's blessing and God's curse....Choose life."

**2 Samuel**--11<sup>5</sup> Bathsheba's pregnancy: avoid the temptation to abort, by avoiding sinful intercourse....7<sup>12-16</sup> David's offspring on the throne forever: abortion frustrates decendency.

**1 Kings**--17<sup>21</sup> TEV "restore the child to life," lit., let the child's *nephesh*, vitality, life-principle, (self-)consciousness, "soul" "return" to the corpse--on the occasion of Elijah's stretching himself three times on the corpse (probably with breathing, as God into "the adam" [Gn.2<sup>7</sup>])--neither story using *ruach*, breath, spirit). While TEV (v.22) says the boy "started breathing again," Heb. has just "lived," meaning was reanimated, for which TEV's is not a bad translation....No, I'm not trying to be pedantic! The core metaphysical controversy within the abortion fracas is When does the 'soul' enter the body? Back up: what's that that's being said "enters" the "body"? Our two primary heritages, Hebrew & Greek, have different but intertwining answers--rich, useful, but unpropositionable (irreducible to coherent-comprehensive statement). Legal history in the West reflects this double reality: belief in "the soul," inability to reach unanimity in rational discourse about it--the awkwardness appears in the text of Roe v. Wade. Add pluralism to the mix & you're in what Bush would call "deep doodoo."....The Hebrews did not have bodies, nor were they only bodies: Greek soul/body dualism was first unknown to them, then resisted, then by some (much of Hellenistic Judaism) digested (eg Wisdom of Solomon 3<sup>1-3</sup> ["The ψυχαι souls of the just are in the hands of God"] & 9<sup>14f</sup> [Our "reasoning is feeble, our plans fallible, because a perishable σῶμα body weighs down the ψυχή soul, and its frame of clay burdens νοῦς the mind"--soma, psyche, mind]). Clay, yes, but (Gn.3<sup>19</sup>) **living** clay, a single reality, said the orthodox against the Greeky likes of Wis.Sol., who sees not even soul/body integration but rather conflictual dualism, the body at best only a σκήνος (9<sup>15</sup>) tent, lodging--the word Paul's uses in 2Cor.5<sup>1,4</sup> & which is found nowhere else in early Christian literature, though in Pythagoreanism & pagan grave inscriptions. Note Wis.Sol.'s conflation: to the Greek image he adds a Hebrew, thus "clay dwelling." Compare/contrast Paul's conflation. What's your own? In your Apocrypha (which I hope is in one of your Bibles) you'll find two books with "wisdom" in the title (Wis.Sol. & Ecclus.), the two most influential in Christianity. See, eg, Wis.Sol.3<sup>1-5</sup>, which is

in many Christian funeral manuals....The early Christians were eager for pagan as well as Jewish wisdom literature: the Nag Hammadi early Christian library (discovered 1945) includes the pagan, somewhat Christianized "Sentences of Sextus"--as Jewish wisdom literature had earlier drawn on pagan wisdom sources & Judaized them....The NT uses *psyche* as the self before & after death. This unitive idea appears in 1 Cor.15<sup>45</sup>, in which Paul is referencing Gn.2<sup>7</sup>: Adam was "created a living being" (in contrast to the Second Adam, "the life-giving Πνεῦμα Spirit." But Paul can also put distance between self & body: in ecstasy (being "outside" his body, 2 Cor.12<sup>2f</sup>) & in death (as being "away from" the body, 2 Cor.5<sup>6-10</sup>; cf. Phil. 1<sup>20-24</sup>)....The Bible witnesses both to the unity of the person & to the mystery of the consciousness/corporeality complexity. It cannot abide the (Greek) doctrine of the "soul" as (1) separate from & (2) superior to the body: its eschatological answer is resurrection, not reincarnation. Alien to Scripture are the cognate notions of (1) the "soul" making repeated trips into "bodies" (ie, reincarnation) or even one trip (ie, at or soon after birth--the Incarnation, as the coming of God not the "soul," not being an exception). But ancient (beginning with Augustine) & medieval Christian theologians, being in their metaphysics more Greek than Hebrew, speculated on when the "soul" enters the "body"; & the idea is still so common in America as to continue to engage theologians and even to have a respectable place in public-legal decision-making. Because of the literary centrality of the Bible, those who believe the-soul-enters-the-body doctrine scrounge around for it in Scripture, as they do for passages on abortion; &, hard put to it, unconsciously resort to eisegesis (in-reading) of both ideas. **DISTINCTION:** While neither idea is specifically in the Bible (the one reference to abortion being of an accidental, not an intentional, incident), it is right to search Scripture for illumination on these (and all other!) ideas & their implications in thought & action. What is wrong is for biblically literate folk to treat the-soul-enters-the-body doctrine as though it were a given, something "everybody believes" who's into the abortion debate: it's something biblically literate & convinced folk do not believe, whether they're pro-life or pro-choice....**IRONY:** We biblical literates are here colleagues with the materialists: both they & we believe that discussing when the soul enters the body is as medieval as debating how many angels can stand on the head of a pin. Both debates fall into the black hole between speculation & data.

**2 Kings--17<sup>16-20</sup>** the Lord "very angry" at human sacrifice.

**1 Chron.--7<sup>23</sup>** "became pregnant and had a son."

**Psalms--8<sup>4-6</sup>** On the model of "high christology," we may call this high anthropology. Though the sky dwarfs us, God's loving care honors us with a status "inferior only" to the supraterrrestrial....51<sup>5</sup> The zygote-embryo, as conceived "in sin," must be human. But the verbal successive parallelism may yield, in translation, to the conceptual synonymous parallelism, as TEV: "I have been evil from the time I was born; / from the day of my birth I have been sinful."....127<sup>3</sup> "Children are a gift from the Lord."....139<sup>1-16a</sup>, a strophe on the intimacy of God and the psalmist. God's knowledge of him is "too deep" for him, & even prevenient (v.4) & pursuant (vv.7-12). The second strophe intensifies the prevenience idea: God created him in the womb (vv.13-16a), so "knew I was there /...saw me before I was born." The focus is not on the creation of this individual psalmist but rather on God's thorough, through-&-through, beginning-to-end, top-to-bottom knowledge of him. Divine action in his prenatal origin & development strengthens his conviction that God can defend, examine, purify, & guide him. Is the psalmist a special case, or are we entitled to generalize? Is every zygote a divine creation, & if so what's to be inferred from that fact (distinct, as human, from eg the zygote of a gnat)?....146<sup>7-9</sup> God "judges in favor of the oppressed...protects the strangers...helps widows and orphans."

**Proverbs--24<sup>11</sup>** God'll get you if you don't protect life, & reward you if you do.....The wisdom literature, frequently contrasting life & death, presents God as pro-life (my word for it, without the technical meaning in the abortion debate). Eg, Job 10<sup>12</sup> "You

have given me life'; & Wis.Sol.1<sup>13</sup> "God did not make death."

**Isaiah**--45<sup>9f</sup>....**Jeremiah**--1<sup>4f</sup> called in womb 7<sup>6</sup> 22<sup>3,17</sup> 32<sup>35</sup>....**Amos**--1<sup>13</sup> 5<sup>21-24</sup>....  
**Zechariah**--7<sup>9f</sup>.

In the Gospels, Jesus is the Life-Bringer through his life, teaching, & sacrificial death--the crucifixion placing a unique value on every human being.

**Matthew** (Jesus as the New Moses)--1<sup>1-16</sup> (L.3<sup>23-38</sup>) Aren't genealogies inherently anti-abortion?...1<sup>20</sup> (L.1<sup>35</sup>) Jesus conceived by the Holy Spirit....5<sup>14</sup>...5<sup>17-20</sup> neighbor-love....5<sup>21-26</sup> not merely doing no harm....10<sup>28-31</sup>....18<sup>10</sup>....22<sup>36-40</sup>....25<sup>37-40</sup>.

**Luke**--1<sup>15</sup>....1<sup>35</sup>....1<sup>39-45</sup> John Baptist jumps for joy in utero, where also he is Spirit-power-endued--so the fetus must be human....1<sup>41</sup> 2<sup>12</sup> same Greek word used for "baby" before birth as well as after....9<sup>46-48</sup> & 18<sup>15-17</sup> Jesus receives children.

**John**--1<sup>1</sup> Jesus' preexistence, so certainly was human in utero--as also v.14 evidences: "The Word became a human being."

NOTE: The "pro-life" the-fetus-is-human argument, adducing scriptures, engages, among the "pro-choice" advocates, only such as deny the fetus is human, a human being, available to God as are all human beings, including every human zygote.

**Paul**--in ideas, not only in diction--uses a full & riotous palette, maddening to the systematician & delightful to the linguist. He's tricultural (Jewish, Greek, Roman), and grabs whatever in the three bins fits his purpose at the moment. As a convert to the Christian movement, he's pro-choice (in general, without prejudice to the question of his stand vis-a-vis abortion): freedom-liberty-liberation is a pervasive motif in his ministry.

**Romans**--6<sup>1f</sup> Pro-life uses this text on the assumption that abortion is sin....12<sup>2</sup> Favoring abortion is, In Christians--says pro-life--an instance of "conforming yourselves to the standards of this world" instead of "letting God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind." Radical pro-choice Christians, too, call for a complete change of mind--from focusing on the fetus to focusing on society and/or the biosphere. (Biosphere scriptures, though pertinent, are not listed in this Thinksheet.)

(For Corinthians, see the ending of "I Kings," above.)....1 **Corinthians**--6<sup>19f</sup> your body "the temple of the Holy Spirit," to be used "for God's glory." Pro-life says this weighs against any "right to my own body."....10<sup>13</sup> God gives strength to endure temptation, so (says pro-life) a deformed or sick fetus should not be aborted: that child is a cross for the parents to bear....2 **Corinthians**--12<sup>7-9</sup> to the same point: such a child is a thorn in the flesh, but (says God) "My power shows up better when you're weak."

**Galatians**--1<sup>11-24</sup> "set me apart before I was born" (v.15)....3<sup>5</sup> Pro-choice accuses pro-life of "doing what the law requires" in the sense of using Scripture as a legal codex in the hunt for proof-texts. Which is why most "abortion scriptures" are adduced not by pro-choice but by pro-life....6<sup>1</sup> Frequently used by pro-life as incentive for confronting pro-choice, the "spiritual" setting wrongdoers right.

**Ephesians**--2<sup>10</sup> "God has made us what we are [lit., "We are God's doing"],...creating us for a life of good deeds."....5<sup>20</sup> "Always giving thanks for everything" includes a deformed or sick fetus.

2 **Timothy**--3<sup>15</sup> Bible knowledge as a child....**Hebrews**--2<sup>17</sup> Jesus like us "in every way," so don't exclude him as a special case irrelevant to abortion....**James**--2<sup>14-17</sup> All, including fetuses, are entitled to "the necessities of life."....1 **John**--1<sup>9</sup> God forgives penitent aborters....2<sup>4-6</sup> "Live just as Jesus Christ did," in obedience to God's commandments" (including thou-shalt-not-abort).