

What does the Bible teach about abortion?

The God of the Bible is a God of perfect justice, tender love, and compassionate grace. As we will see, these three come together uniquely on the topic of abortion to offer a message of life, hope, and healing. The three major themes that emerge are:

- 1) Perfect justice: God has a fierce passion for defending the weak and vulnerable and a wrath for those who unrepentantly trample on them and their rights.
- 2) Tender love: God is a ‘God who sees’, who weeps for the lost, who ‘heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds’. He is a God who likewise commands us to love both woman and child.
- 3) Compassionate grace: God’s forgiveness is open to all, no matter what they have done. ‘His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning’.

1 Perfect justice: protecting the vulnerable

The Bible is clear from start to finish that protection of the vulnerable and downtrodden is one of God’s biggest concerns. Proverbs commands us to ‘Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.’ (24:11) Amos promises judgment on Israel, ‘who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted’ (2:7). Isaiah says that God calls our worship an ‘*abomination*’ if our ‘hands are full of blood’ (1:13-15). Not only are we to refrain from shedding blood: we are guilty also if we are bystanders and allow blood to be shed without intervening.

One of the most heinous sins committed by Israel was the sacrifice of children. The concept of ‘hell’ itself comes from the Hebrew *Ge Hinnom* – Hinnom Valley – a valley outside Jerusalem made famous precisely because of the sacrifice of children there (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:2-6; 32:35; 2 Kings 23:10). This is relevant because from the earliest period of Christianity (and Judaism before it), abortion and infanticide were consistently grouped together. Hence the Didache, a document on Christian teaching/ethics from the 1st century (while some of the apostles were still alive), groups abortion and infanticide together, seeing both of them as the murder of children.¹ The earliest Christians also explicitly said that opposing abortion was a central part of *loving their neighbour* – it wasn’t just a ritual impurity or a means of judging people. It was a part of love for one’s neighbour, one of Jesus’ greatest commandments.

Jesus is no different. He says that we will be sent away from God to depart into eternal fire if we do not actively rescue the ‘least of these’ in their time of need (Matthew 25). The Parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us of our radical duties to those have been, or are being, abused. It is no coincidence that the foremost defence of abortion in academic history explicitly argued that *we do not need to be Good Samaritans by allowing unborn babies to live*. Jesus says the opposite: if we do not emulate the Good Samaritan, we fail to love our neighbour and fail to love Jesus. We are called to love the last, the least, and the lost.

2 Tender love: loving mother and child

One of the most touching stories of the Bible is in a woman’s time of desperate need. Hagar was the most vulnerable woman possible: a woman, an Egyptian, a concubine, no longer a virgin, pregnant, a slave, fleeing to the wilderness with an unborn son. Instead of God telling her to cope by herself, or to exercise her ‘rights’, or abandoning her, he reaches out to her with the deepest compassion:

¹ This was in contrast to the Romans, who grouped them together in the other direction: they practised both abortion and infanticide liberally.

‘I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude ... you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael [God hears], because the LORD has listened to your affliction.’

She calls him a ‘God of seeing’: ‘Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.’ She calls the well ‘Beer-lahai-roi’: ‘the well of the Living One who sees me’. God knows the slave girl, Hagar, and already knows and has named her unborn son, Ishmael.

The story goes even further. After returning to Abraham, she is sent out again. This time, she is even more desperate, as she runs out of water. She thinks that allowing the child to die is the lesser of two evils, the most compassionate thing to do. So she leaves Ishmael under a bush and runs far away to weep. She weeps and cries out and – again, beyond wild expectation, heaven hears her. ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up! Lift up the body, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.’ She gets up, and sees a well, gives Ishmael a drink, and the rest of history shows Ishmael’s legacy.

Christmas is, at its very centre, a story about a crisis pregnancy. This is remarkable to think about: out of all the ways God could have entered the world, he chose to enter through a crisis pregnancy, through a family tree of prostitutes (Tamar and Rahab), Moabites (Ruth), and a woman taken in murder and adultery (Bathsheba). Mary herself was in an extremely vulnerable position: a young woman who had become pregnant as a ‘virgin’: this was so suspicious that Joseph himself wanted to break the engagement. Mary was facing the shame of her community and even abandonment by the only person she would have left, Joseph. But God promises to look after her:

“Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying ... And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God ... you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus [Joshua, meaning ‘Yahweh is my help’]. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

As the body of Christ, we are bound to follow his teaching in loving both mother and child in difficult situations, particularly supporting women who are pregnant in crisis situations. For the Christian, both lives matter immeasurably.

3 Compassionate grace

The Bible and church tradition are clear that unborn children are human beings made in the image of God, and hence that abortion is murder. But the most world-changing part of the Bible was that, by Jesus’ blood, even the ‘chief of sinners’ can be saved and washed completely clean.

Women have often faced particular shame in human communities, partly because of their vulnerable position, and partly because a woman’s infidelity is so much more obvious than a man’s: because only she courageously bears the burdens of pregnancy. This is, of course, why abortion so commonly occurs.

Jesus had a particularly moving way of healing women with his radical grace. In one episode, a woman – known only and wholly as a ‘sinner’ – comes to see him as he dines with the elites of society. She cries on him, wiping his feet with her tears and kissing them, before anointing them. This could only be profoundly embarrassing: to have the lowest of sinners in society behaving this way when you are dining with the elites. The Pharisee he is with even thinks this is proof he is not a prophet: “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” Jesus responds with a parable:

“A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.” Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7:36-50)

Jesus offers the greatest of honours – anointing the King of Kings and the Son of God – to a woman whose entire identity was that she was a ‘sinner’. This is the kind of radical grace, honour, and dignity that is available to all women who have had an abortion. As Jesus says of another sinner:

“Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:1-10)

The unborn in the Bible

The Bible says nothing about fertilisation specifically – but that is because fertilisation was not known about at the time. Rather than being a problem, this further confirms that the beginning of life at fertilisation is a fundamentally *scientific* claim. The Bible and Christian tradition simply teach that all human beings – no matter their abilities or achievements – are made in the Image of God and worthy of his protection. Since science teaches us that life begins at fertilisation, it follows that the Bible forbids us from taking life from that moment.

The Bible is clear, however, that life begins in the womb, and that we are known and loved by God from our earliest days of development in the womb. Most famously, Psalm 139 describes how God ‘knitted me together in my mother’s womb’ and therefore we are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’. The Psalm even refers to the earliest days of embryonic life when it mentions God’s eyes seeing ‘my unformed substance’² and how even at that point our days were written in God’s book. God has a plan for humans from their earliest days in the womb.

Psalm 71 makes clear that whether we are ‘dependent’ makes no difference to our value: the Psalmist says that he is completely dependent on God now, and was completely dependent on God in the womb: ‘Upon you I have leaned from before my birth; you are he who took me from my mother’s womb’. Job describes ‘infants who never see the light’ in the context of miscarriage (3:16).

Jeremiah talks of the possibility of being ‘killed in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave’ (20:15-17), showing clearly that the unborn are alive and that abortion involves killing. God also directly describes consecrating Jeremiah in the womb at the very start of the book: ‘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.’ (1:4-5)

The relationship between mother and child in the womb as one of nurturing and tender care is so powerful and paradigmatic that Isaiah uses it to describe the relationship between God and Israel

² Throughout most of history, there has been a distinction between an unformed and a formed child in the womb (the unformed stage referring to the earliest stage of development). This was made most famous by Aristotle.

twice (44:2, 24). The metaphor is made concrete for Isaiah himself: 'The LORD called me from the womb, From the body of my mother he named my name.' (49:1)

Jesus is described throughout the gospels as having *compassion*. It's one of his most defining traits, and one which is universally admired by Christians and non-Christians alike. This word has a history, of course. It was used throughout the entire Old Testament/Hebrew Bible to refer to God's compassion, often translated as his 'mercies'. In Hebrew, the word is 'rachamim'.

The word 'rachamim' comes from the word 'rechem', which means... womb. What this means is that the paradigm expression of compassion - the primary example God chose to use in His word to illustrate His compassion for His children - is *the love and care a mother has for the child in her womb*.

For pro-lifers, one profound implication of this is obvious: the Bible portrays the care a mother has for her unborn child as the *defining* example of compassion.

But here's another: women have historically been dismissed, denigrated, humiliated, *precisely by reference to their wombs*. The word 'hysterical' comes from the Greek word 'hystera', also meaning 'womb'. To describe someone as 'hysterical' is, essentially, to describe them as emotional to the point of irrationality. It is a slur. Most of us have probably used it in our worse moments. In former times 'hysteria' was even considered a medical illness.

To describe someone as 'hysterical' is -at least etymologically, if not intentionally - to dismiss them as being 'womby' - meaning uncontrollably irrational.

But the Bible describes God himself as 'womby'. It says that his 'mercies' are new every day. It is not calling God uncontrollably irrational. It is using the compassion, care and mercy of women towards their unborn child as the defining illustration of God's compassion towards us.

To describe God in these terms is far more radical than a simple look at the text would ever tell us. It tells us that the peak of human compassion is shown in the relationship between a mother and her unborn child, and it says that *God is like that*.

In this way the Bible, as it does subtly so many times, points to the infinite worth of women and their unborn children at the same time. This is a profound and beautiful dignification of both. Both lives are infinitely precious to Him.

There are many other examples that could be discussed,³ but the clear picture that emerges is one of God's tender care, knowledge, calling and consecration of children in the womb. They are not parasites, or dead clumps of cells, or parts of their mother. They are humans, intimately known, loved, and planned by God.

The New Testament continues this theme, and has profound things to say about the unborn. It is usually possible to tell someone's position on abortion from the way they describe the unborn: do they call it a parasite, or a clump of cells, or a baby, or a child? The New Testament is clear in this respect.

When Mary became pregnant, after being reassured by the angel Gabriel, she went with haste to Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Scholars have observed the remarkable and seemingly deliberate similarities between Mary coming to Elizabeth and the Ark coming to Jerusalem. Only, instead of David dancing before the presence of God, David is replaced by an unborn baby:

"She entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is

³ E.g., Samson being dedicated to God from the womb (Judges 13:5), Jacob and Esau struggling together in the womb (Genesis 25:22).

this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”

This teaches us at least 3 things about the unborn: firstly, it means that at this very early stage of Mary’s pregnancy, she was bearing God himself in human form. One of the central events in history – God becoming flesh – happened not as a baby in a manger, but as a baby in the womb.

Secondly, it offers an incredible dignity to unborn children: that an unborn child was the first witness and the first to celebrate the coming of Jesus. Just as God dignified women in an unprecedented way by making them the first witnesses to Jesus’ empty tomb and resurrection in his ‘second’ life, so God dignified unborn children by making one the first witness (after Mary) of his first life.

Finally, the word used for the unborn John the Baptist shows a deep continuity between unborn life and born life, and in a way which shows God’s special concern for unborn children. The Greek word is βρεφος (‘brephos’): the ‘brephos’ leaped in her womb. Rather than carve a distinction between ‘foetuses’ and ‘babies’, the Bible uses the exact same terminology for both. For in the very next chapter, Luke uses the exact same word to describe Jesus as a baby in the manger, also a ‘brephos’, this time born. Jesus is *worshipped* as a ‘brephos’ – God incarnate was a ‘brephos’. There is no sense of a difference between the two: they are ‘babies’ before and after birth. One telling question which Christian abortion advocates have never been able to answer is: Should Mary have been allowed to abort Jesus? If no, then her bodily autonomy does not outweigh the right to life. If yes, this is surely blasphemous.

But there’s more: as an adult Jesus, actually singles out such humans as being especially treasured by God and especially welcome in his kingdom:

“People were also bringing babies [‘brephos’] to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.””
(Luke 18:15-17)

Remarkably, Jesus points to the baby, or child, ‘brephos’, as the exact model for people to emulate to enter his kingdom. And that is exactly the word used of the unborn John the Baptist at the very beginning of Luke’s story.

Throughout the rest of the New Testament, the same word is used to describe babies: Peter encourages his readers to be ‘like newborn infants’ as they ‘long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation’ (1 Peter 2:2). And in Acts 7, the first martyr, Stephen, recalls the infants tragically killed by Pharaoh in the time of Moses’ birth, and how Pharaoh ‘forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive.’

So although the Bible may not explicitly mention abortion,⁴ it is clear that the unborn are fully human, known intimately by God, called in the womb and named by God, continuous from the womb to childhood, and welcomed by Jesus

Most profoundly, however, they are at the very heart of the Christmas story: they are how God chose to enter the world, and who God chose to witness and celebrate his coming into the world. When God took on our frail, broken and despised humanity to bring us strength, healing and honour, he brought that same honour and dignity first to unborn children.

To think that God entered the world in a manger is to undermine the Biblical text and to undermine the incredible bravery, obedience and pain that Mary went through to nurture him in the womb. God

⁴ Though there is a case that it does refer fairly directly to abortion; see later.

didn't enter the world in a manger: he entered the world as an even tinier, even more vulnerable human being in the womb of a vulnerable but wonderfully brave young woman.

There is, therefore, one question that is particularly hard for Christian abortion advocates to answer: would it have been OK for Mary to have an abortion? It seems impossible to believe that any Christian would say 'yes'. But if it wasn't OK for Mary to have an abortion, why is it OK to abort any other humans, made in God's Image, who enter the world in the same way that God himself did?

The Early Church

It is because of this continuity between the womb and early infancy that the early Christians opposed abortion and infanticide together and almost always rejected both not just as wrong, but as murder. Far from the pro-life movement being a backwards embarrassment, the Christian pro-life movement is the precise reason infanticide is illegal in most of the world today. Before Christianity, infanticide was extremely common. It was Christians who managed to outlaw infanticide soon after having the political power to do so, while at the same time writing time and time again about fulfilling their duty to look after orphans and single mothers. While abandoned babies in the Roman world were usually taken as slaves, even sex slaves, Christians rescued them not into slavery but into *family*. Ensuring that orphans were adopted and raised with care and love was an explicit obligation for the bishops, the most important people in the global Church, while the very first Christian Emperor, Constantine, declared in law: 'If any parent should report that he has offspring which on account of poverty he is not able to rear, there shall be no delay in issuing food and clothing', using churches as the welfare distribution centres for this programme. Early Christian graveyards have even been found with huge proportions of unborn babies buried there, buried in the same way as adults.⁵

Hence it was against a background of deep concern and radical generosity towards women and their babies, born and unborn, that the early Christians spoke clearly about abortion. The early believers made sure to provide for widows (Acts 6), and James writes that true religion *is* 'to visit orphans and widows in their affliction' (1:27).

Thus the Christians acted both politically and practically: to give babies and orphans the legal protection they deserved and needed, as well as showing radical generosity and love to vulnerable women and children who needed support. This consistency in defending life is part of what gave them the moral authority to speak so clearly about abortion and infanticide together. From the time of the apostles, the Church has been absolutely clear that abortion and infanticide are both murder.

The Didache, though not eventually making it into the Bible, was considered scripture by many orthodox Christians and was considered good Christian teaching even by those who did not consider it scripture. It was written in the lifetime of some of Jesus' followers (towards the end of the first century) and states very clearly: 'You shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill it after it is born' (2.2). It likewise condemns 'murderers of children, destroyers of the handiwork of God', the latter phrase ('handiwork' [plasmatos]) possibly intending to specifically address early abortions.

Likewise, the Epistle of Barnabas was written at the beginning of the second century and was considered scripture by many orthodox writers – it even appears in the *Codex Sinaiticus*, the oldest

⁵ Gillian E. Bowen, "Child, infants and foetal burials of the Late Roman period at Ismant el-Kharab, ancient Kellis, Dakhleh Oasis," in *L'enfant et la mort dans l'Antiquité*, ed. Marie-Dominique Nenna, pp. 351-372; Sara Kitat, "Early Christian fetal burials in the Egyptian Western Desert in the midst of magic and inhumation," *Mitteilungen zur Christlichen Archäologie*, 27: 95-110.
Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity, ed. David Hunter, Paul van Geest, and Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte (forthcoming).

existing complete copy of the New Testament. It says: ‘you shall not slay the child by procuring abortion; neither shall you destroy it after it is born.’ (19:5)

The Apocalypse of Peter was written in the early 2nd century and was considered scripture by many orthodox writers. It goes even further, describing the punishment of murderers. In this section it includes people who had obtained abortions being punished by having fire shot into their eyes (25).

This is not to claim that any of these are in fact scripture – that they were considered scripture in many parts of the early church does not mean they are scripture. But it does mean that their unanimous teaching on abortion very likely reflects the teaching of the apostles and of Jesus himself. The Didache itself explicitly claims to have reflected Jesus’ teaching through the twelve apostles, and this claim has never been significantly disputed within the Church – indeed, the early Church writers repeated it.

Church history has been crystal clear ever since this very early period. Abortion was condemned by virtually all the major Christian writers of the first few centuries, usually explicitly as murder. It was condemned by Athenagoras (177 AD), Tertullian (late 2nd century), Clement of Alexandria (late 2nd century), Minucius Felix (early 3rd century), Hippolytus (early 3rd century), Cyprian (mid 3rd century), Lactantius (early 4th century), Jerome (late 4th century), Ambrose (late 4th century), John Chrysostom (late 4th century), Basil the Great (late 4th century), and Augustine (late 4th century), among others. When Church law began to be developed in the early 4th century, those procuring abortions were banned from Communion for life (this was later shortened to 10 years, not because it was thought a lesser crime, but because of the importance placed on grace). The Church law against abortion was reiterated in the Council of Chalcedon, the great ecumenical council which clarified the nature of the incarnation for centuries to come. In the Protestant tradition, Calvin and Luther both strongly condemned abortion, as did the 20th century theologians Barth and Bonhoeffer. Thus Church teaching was absolutely unanimous from the time of the apostles: abortion and infanticide are the same thing: murder.

Why didn’t Jesus mention abortion?

Perhaps the biggest challenge to the Christian position on abortion is that Jesus never mentioned it directly. That said, the claim that the New Testament does not mention it is less certain. It is likely that the references to ‘witchcraft’ or ‘sorcery’ (*pharmakeia*) in Galatians 5:19-20, Revelation 9:21; 21:8 and 22:15 least include abortion, for a variety of reasons.⁶ Although it could mean drugs in general, it was frequently used specifically to refer to abortive drugs specifically, including in at least two of the Jewish sources shortly before the time of Jesus, Pseudo-Phocylides and the Sibylline Oracles, and in some early Christian literature, such as Hippolytus. In the *Didache*, abortion is specifically included when murder, sorcery and sexual immorality are condemned together – abortion being clearly related to all three. This joint condemnation is seen almost exactly at multiple points in Revelation, a document of a very similar date (late 1st century), suggesting that abortion is in view in these prohibitions (the parallelism is less clear in Galatians):

Galatians 5:19-20	Revelation 9:21	Revelation 21:8	Revelation 22:15	Didache 2:2
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⁶ Robert Arner, “Abortion,” in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. David Hunter, Paul van Geest, and Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte (forthcoming).

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality , impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery , enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.	nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.	But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers , the sexually immoral , sorcerers , idolaters, and all liars...	Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.	You shall not commit murder , you shall not commit adultery , you shall not commit pederasty , you shall not commit fornication , you shall not steal, you shall not practice magic , you shall not practice witchcraft , you shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is born.
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Beyond this, abortion was consistently condemned specifically as murder – often as parricide – in the first few centuries AD. It was usually considered the same thing as infanticide, both in Jewish sources before/at the time of Jesus⁷ (see below) and in the earliest Christian writings shortly after.⁸ The prohibition was repeated by at least 16 Christian writers prior to Augustine, plus two early Councils, with the canons against abortion being re-affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon. Hence there is every reason to suppose that Jesus, belonging to both of these two traditions both comparing abortion with infanticide, would have categorised abortion the same way.

Even if the Bible doesn't directly mention abortion, however, the reasons for this are quite clear:

Firstly, there are many things that Jesus didn't speak about directly, for many reasons. And of course, there are some things he spoke about that simply weren't recorded. In general, this is a bad reason to think that Jesus wasn't against it. Jesus didn't speak out about cybercrime, female genital mutilation, or human trafficking either, but that is a very poor reason to think that he did/does not oppose them. Defenders of slavery throughout history used the lack of explicit ban on slavery in the Bible to defend it – even though the *principles* of the Bible banning slavery are clear. Jesus did not reaffirm every part of Jewish law because it was unnecessary to do so. Likewise, he did not explicitly reaffirm this part of Jewish law (or, at least, it was not recorded when/if he did so).

Secondly, things that Jesus said can still *entail* the wrongness of abortion. For example, Jesus was clear that all human beings are made in God's image, that killing human beings is wrong, and he even said that the kingdom of God belongs to the 'least of these' – referring to 'babies' – the same word used for unborn children elsewhere in the same Gospel.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we come to explain why Jesus didn't speak about it. The reason is very simple: Jewish culture and law were both very clearly already against abortion. Jesus did not need to reiterate every element of Jewish law because it was well known and taken for granted. Likewise, since Jews valued children so highly and considered them a blessing (throughout the Old Testament), abortion was not a significant problem in Jewish communities. The New Testament is not a moral textbook: it is a series of historical narratives and letters in specific contexts,

⁷ E.g. Philo, Pseudo-Phocylides and the Sibylline Oracles.

⁸ A fuller treatment is beyond the scope of this short paper. Gorman (1982) offers a comprehensive account of early teaching, while Jones (2004) considers the Biblical material in some detail. I argue elsewhere [ref suppressed] that attempts to identify a lesser status for the foetus in Exodus 21:22-25 and Number 5:11-28 fail, the primary reason being that there is no exegetical basis for supposing that either passage refers to miscarriage.

addressing the specific issues that were controversial in those contexts. Abortion was not. Let's look at the Jewish evidence.

- 1) Pseudo-Phocylides, a Jewish document from around the time of Jesus (estimated 50 BC – 50 AD), refers to abortion. It says that 'a woman should not destroy the unborn in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before the dogs and vultures as prey' (184-186). Earlier, it specifically references the harming of unborn children in connection with *pharmakeia* (149-150).
- 2) The Sibylline Oracles,⁹ also from around the time of Jesus, contain a list of the 'wicked', including those who 'produce abortions and unlawfully cast their offspring away', as well as sorcerers who dispense drugs (*pharmakeia*) causing abortion (2.281-282).
- 3) The Parables of Enoch, dating to the early first century (the precise time of Jesus), describe how an evil angel 'showed the sons of men all the evil blows of spirits and demons, and the blows of the foetus in the womb, so that it aborts' (1 Enoch 69.12). The Epistle of Enoch, from around a century before Jesus, describes people living under God's judgment and how they will abandon born children and abort unborn children (1 Enoch 99:5). The books of Enoch were extremely popular among Jews at Jesus' time.
- 4) Josephus, by far the most comprehensive Jewish historian of the first century, from whom we get most of our knowledge about Judaism at the time of Jesus, was also very clear about the law itself:
'The law moreover enjoins us to bring up all our offspring: and forbids women to cause abortion of what is begotten; or to destroy it afterward. And if any woman appears to have so done, she will be a murderer of her child; by destroying a living creature, and diminishing human kind. If anyone therefore proceeds to such fornication, or murder, he cannot be clean.' (Against Apion, 2.25)
- 5) A variety of Jewish writers from the time of Jesus abstained from intercourse during pregnancy, in some cases precisely because of concern about harming the foetus.
- 6) Philo, perhaps the other leading Jewish writer of the first century AD, clearly prohibited abortion, and is a particularly helpful example because he shows that even when Jews thought unborn babies were not fully human from conception, they *still* prohibited abortion in the early parts of pregnancy. In early pregnancy, he says that abortion 'obstructs the artist Nature in her creative work'. In later pregnancy, he said that abortion should be punished by execution (Special Laws, 3.117-118). In giving a rational defence of the Jewish nation to outsiders, he notes again that Jewish law forbade abortion: 'it is ordained in the laws themselves ... that no one shall cause the offspring of women to be abortive by means of miscarriage, or by any other contrivance.' (Hypothetica, 7.7)
- 7) The Talmud itself – the fundamental text of Rabbinic Judaism – discussing the covenant of Noah in Genesis 9:6 ('Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in his image did God make man') says that this applies to foetuses: 'A descent of Noah is executed even for killing fetuses' (Sanhedrin 57b).
- 8) Non-Jews themselves noted that not performing abortion or infanticide was a distinctive feature of the Jews: "However, the Jews see to it that their numbers increase. It is a deadly sin to kill a born or unborn child, and they think that eternal life is granted to those who die in battle or execution – hence their eagerness to have children, and their contempt for death." (Tacitus, Histories 5.5)
- 9) Far less directly, but still worthy of note, is that abortion is never even *considered* when it would be most 'appropriate' in the Jewish texts. Perhaps the best example is that of Jesus' birth itself. Jesus would be one of the best candidates for abortion: a scandalous pregnancy in a very vulnerable context, threats from the King to kill any challengers to his throne, and a husband considering divorce because of the scandal of the pregnancy. This, in a time and

⁹ Not to be confused with the Roman Sibylline Books.

place when women were extremely vulnerable and highly dependent on men for any status and protection in society. And yet that never goes through the minds of either Mary or Joseph: Joseph considers divorce, not abortion. And Mary considers neither. It was not even on their radar; it was unthinkable.

Conclusion

In summary:

- 1) The Bible teaches that God is perfectly just, and requires of us that we actively rescue those whose blood is being shed. Israel was particularly strongly condemned for the infanticide of its children – and Jews and Christians were both clear that abortion and infanticide were the same kind of thing.
- 2) The Bible teaches that God is perfectly loving, and that he has compassion and care for vulnerable women and children in difficult situations – especially crisis pregnancies.
- 3) The Bible and medical science are clear that life begins in the womb, and the Bible describes how God knows, loves, and calls those of his children who are still in the womb. He knows their days and their name before they have seen the light of day, while he knits them together with the greatest care and purpose. Unborn children are particularly valued by Jesus, and an unborn child was the first to rejoice at the news of the Messiah, leaping for joy in his mother's womb.
- 4) The early Church combined political and practical love for women and their unborn children: they insisted both on their duty to take care of vulnerable women and orphans, as well as the absolute need for legal protection for unborn and born infants, which helped them to eventually ban abortion and infanticide together. The Church was clear from the earliest days that abortion is murder.
- 5) There are various reasons why we do not have any record of Jesus speaking directly about abortion. The clearest, however, is that Judaism at the time was already absolutely clear that abortion was impermissible, so Jesus had no need to repeat what was already common knowledge.

While the Church and Bible are absolutely clear that abortion is not only wrong, but specifically murder, they are also absolutely and resolutely clear on God's boundless grace for those involved in abortion: whether women having an abortion, or men encouraging, supporting, coercing or performing an abortion. Unborn children deserve and need legal protection, and this should not be compromised. At the same time, those who have been involved in procuring abortion need healing and grace, and the Bible prescribes these in abundance:

Verses on Grace

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Romans 8:1

"Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Luke 19:9-10

"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." Luke 7:47

"Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." John 8:10-11

“And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Luke 15:6-7

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” Ephesians 2:4-7

“Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave^{to} to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” John 8:34-36

“I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... I will be their God, and they shall be my people... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” Jeremiah 31:31-34

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” 2 Chronicles 7:14

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you: that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:5-9

“Nevertheless, he looked upon their distress,
when he heard their cry.
For their sake he remembered his covenant,
and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love.” Psalm 106:44-45

“though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.” Isaiah 1:18

“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.” Lamentations 3:22-23

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD’s hand
double for all her sins.” Isaiah 40:1-2

Before the throne - hymn

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea
A great High Priest whose name is love
Who ever lives and pleads for me
My name is graven on His hands
My name is written on His heart
I know that while in heav'n He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart*

*When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin
Because the sinless Saviour died
My sinful soul is counted free
For God the Just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me*

*Behold Him there, the risen Lamb
My perfect, spotless Righteousness
The great unchangeable I AM
The King of glory and of grace
One with Himself, I cannot die
My soul is purchased by His blood
My life is hid with Christ on high
With Christ my Saviour and my God*

Appendix: early church writers on abortion

You shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill it after it is born' (The Didache, 2.2)

'You shall not slay the child by procuring abortion; neither shall you destroy it after it is born' (Epistle of Barnabas, 19:5)

'And near that place I saw another strait place into which the gore and the filth of those who were being punished ran down and became there as it were a lake: and there sat women having the gore up to their necks, and over against them sat many children who were born to them out of due time, crying; and there came forth from them sparks of fire and smote the women in the eyes: and these were the accursed who conceived and caused abortion.' (Apocalypse of Peter, 25)

'For instance, Peter in the Apocalypse says that the children who are born out of due time shall be of the better part: and that these are delivered over to a care-taking angel that they may attain a share of knowledge and gain the better abode' (Apocalypse of Peter, cited in Clement of Alexandria's Eclogues)

'They marry, as do all; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring.' (Epistle to Diognetus, 5)

'And when we say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder? For it does not belong to the same person to regard the very foetus in the womb as a created being (and therefore an object of God's care), and when it has passed into life, to kill it; and not to expose an infant, because those who expose them are chargeable with child-murder, and on the other hand, when it has been reared to destroy it. But we are in all things always alike and the same, submitting ourselves to reason, and not ruling over it.' (Athenagoras, Plea for the Christians, 35)

'In our case, murder being once for all forbidden, we may not destroy even the foetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance. To hinder a birth is merely a speedier man-killing; nor does it matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to the birth. That is a man which is going to be one, you have the fruit already in its seed.' (Tertullian, Apology, 9)

'Our whole life can go on in observation of the laws of nature, if we gain dominion over our desires from the beginning and if we do not kill, by various means of a perverse art, the human offspring, born according to the designs of divine providence; for these women who, in order to hide their immorality, use abortive drugs which expel the child completely dead, abort at the same time all humanity.' (Clement of Alexandria, The Teacher)

'And I see that you at one time expose your begotten children to wild beasts and to birds; at another, that you crush them when strangled with a miserable kind of death. There are some women who, by drinking medical preparations, extinguish the source of the future man in their very bowels, and thus commit a parricide before they bring forth.' (Marcus Minucius Felix, Octavius, 30)

'Whence women, reputed believers, began to resort to drugs for producing sterility, and to gird themselves round, so to expel what was being conceived on account of their not wishing to have a child either by a slave or by any paltry fellow, for the sake of their family and excessive wealth. Behold, into how great impiety that lawless one has proceeded, by inculcating adultery and murder at the same time! And withal, after such audacious acts, they, lost to all shame, attempt to call themselves a Catholic Church!' (Hippolytus)

'The womb of his wife was smitten by a blow of his heel; and in the miscarriage that soon followed, the offspring was brought forth, the fruit of a father's murder. And now does he dare to condemn the

hands of those who sacrifice, when he himself is more guilty in his feet, by which the son, who was about to be born, was slain?’ (Cyprian, Letter 48)

‘Therefore, with regard to this precept of God, there ought to be no exception at all; but that it is always unlawful to put to death a man, whom God willed to be a sacred animal. Therefore let no one imagine that even this is allowed, to strangle newly-born children, which is the greatest impiety; for God breathes into their souls for life, and not for death. But men, that there may be no crime with which they may not pollute their hands, deprive souls as yet innocent and simple of the light which they themselves have not given.’ (Lactantius, Divine Institutes 6)

‘Some, when they find themselves with child through their sin, use drugs to procure abortion, and when (as often happens) they die with their offspring, they enter the lower world laden with the guilt not only of adultery against Christ but also of suicide and child murder.’ (Jerome, Letter 22, 13)

‘Those who are very poor expose their infants and refuse to lay claim to them when they are discovered. Even the wealthy, in order that their inheritance may not be divided among several, deny in the very womb their own progeny. By the use of parricidal mixtures they snuff out the fruits of their wombs in the genital organs themselves.’ (Ambrose, Hexameron, 5.18.58)

‘For if you have departed even, the memorials of your unseemliness abide. Why then bring disgrace upon all these? Why sow where the ground makes it its care to destroy the fruit? For even the harlot you do not let continue a mere harlot, but you make her a murderess also. You see how drunkenness leads to whoredom, whoredom to adultery, adultery to murder; or rather to a something even worse than murder. For I have no name to give it, since it does not take off the thing born, but prevent its being born. Why then do you abuse the gift of God, and fight with His laws, and follow after what is a curse as if a blessing, and make the chamber of procreation a chamber for murder, and arm the woman that was given for childbearing unto slaughter? For with a view to drawing more money by being agreeable and an object of longing to her lovers, even this she is not backward to do, so heaping upon your head a great pile of fire. For even if the daring deed be hers, yet the causing of it is yours.’ (John Chrysostom, Homily 24 on Romans)

‘The woman who purposely destroys her unborn child is guilty of murder. With us there is no nice enquiry as to its being formed or unformed. In this case it is not only the being about to be born who is vindicated, but the woman in her attack upon herself; because in most cases women who make such attempts die. The destruction of the embryo is an additional crime, a second murder, at all events if we regard it as done with intent. The punishment, however, of these women should not be for life, but for the term of ten years. And let their treatment depend not on mere lapse of time, but on the character of their repentance... Women also who administer drugs [pharmaka] to cause abortion, as well as those who take poisons to destroy unborn children, are murderesses.’ (Basil of Caesarea, Letter 188, 2,8)

‘They who resort to these, although called by the name of spouses, are really not such; they retain no vestige of true matrimony, but pretend the honourable designation as a cloak for criminal conduct. Having also proceeded so far, they are betrayed into exposing their children, which are born against their will... Sometimes, indeed, this lustful cruelty, or if you please, cruel lust, resorts to such extravagant methods as to use poisonous drugs to secure barrenness; or else, if unsuccessful in this, to destroy the conceived seed by some means previous to birth, preferring that its offspring should rather perish than receive vitality; or if it was advancing to life within the womb, should be slain before it was born. Well, if both parties alike are so flagitious, they are not husband and wife; and if such were their character from the beginning, they have not come together by wedlock but by debauchery. But if the two are not alike in such sin, I boldly declare either that the woman is, so to say, the husband’s harlot; or the man the wife’s adulterer.’ (Augustine, On Marriage and Concupiscence, 1.17)