

Abortion and infanticide in the ancient world

This article is one of a series on the topic of abortion which are all available at the website johnwyatt.com

The articles are:

Abortion in the modern world

Abortion and infanticide in the ancient world

Contemporary secular philosophers and abortion and infanticide

When is a person? Christian perspectives on the beginning of life

Abortion – ethical dilemmas and compassionate responses

‘If you don't know where you are going,’ Archbishop William Temple once said, ‘It is sometimes helpful to know where you have been’. As moderns, we tend to imagine that our problems are unique to our generation. Yet the debate about abortion and infanticide is an ancient one in the history of Western civilisation and in the history of the Christian church. By delving into some musty history, we may gain a fresh perspective on the debate which is still raging.

Both abortion and infanticide have been common practices since the earliest records of human history. Far from being confined to primitive, unsophisticated communities, both were well-known in the cosmopolitan and advanced civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome. In the city states of Greece and throughout the Roman Republic, abortion was widely available. It was a service provided by both professional and amateur abortionists and by some physicians. The methods included manipulation of the abdomen and uterus, herbal medications given by vaginal

pessaries or by mouth, and a range of surgical techniques using tools specially designed for the purpose.

In most regions abortions were readily available, although at a price. They were thus more common amongst wealthy women than among the poor. Probably the commonest reason for obtaining an abortion was so that a woman might conceal sexual activity, but it is well attested that wealthy women would obtain abortions merely to preserve their figures and their sexual attractiveness.

The practice of abortion was endorsed by many prominent philosophers and writers. In discussing the role of women in his ideal *Republic*, Plato stated forcefully that women should have an abortion above the age of 40 years, presumably because of an increased risk of maternal death and fetal abnormality. Aristotle in his work *Politics* recommended both infanticide and abortion if there was a risk of a 'deformed child', or an excess number of existing children in a family. He recognised however that infanticide by exposure of normal children might not be acceptable in certain regions and therefore recommended an abortion in these cases.

'On the ground of number of children, if the regular customs hinder any of those born being exposed, there must be a limit fixed to the procreation of offspring, and if any people have a child as a result of intercourse in contravention of these regulations, abortion must be practised on it before it has developed sensation and life: for the line between lawful and unlawful abortion will be marked by the fact of having sensation and being alive.'

A major concern of the leaders of Greek city states was overpopulation leading to famine and social breakdown. Both abortion and infanticide were seen as entirely rational and reasonable approaches to this danger. The attitudes to babies and children within the classical Graeco-Roman world were startlingly different from our own. Contemporary

Graeco-Roman society was fundamentally hierarchical. At the top of the pile were the elite: politicians, philosophers, athletes. Next down were ordinary decent working people: farmers, soldiers, tradespeople. Further down were women. And then there was the riff-raff: children, slaves, the disabled, the leper, and other undesirables. It was a society that prized athleticism, strength and what were called 'the masculine virtues', so it was natural for children to be despised because of their weakness, dependence and immaturity. The significance and worth that society tended to place on an individual child was in proportion to his or her future contribution to the state as an adult.

Like abortion, the intentional killing of malformed or unwanted newborn babies, by exposure, strangling or drowning, was a widespread practice. In fact the practice was so common that one contemporary historian, Polybius, writing in the second century BC, concluded that it had contributed to the serious depopulation that had occurred in Greece at the time. There were no laws prohibiting the killing of malformed or sick infants and even healthy newborn babies were frequently unprotected by legal statute or social custom. Infanticide was such a natural and common event that it is mentioned frequently in comedies and plays of the period.

It seems that the majority of philosophers and writers of the period supported both abortion and infanticide. In Plato's *Republic* infanticide is regarded as essential to maintain the quality of the citizens. 'The offspring of the inferior and any of those of the other sort who are born defective, they will properly dispose of in secret, so that no one will know what has become of them'. For Plato, children were valued according to their approximation to the ideal adult. They must be 'malleable, disposed to virtue and physically fit'.

Aristotle supported a law to ensure the compulsory exposure of all malformed babies, 'As to exposing or rearing the children born let there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared'. Seneca, in his treatise *On Anger*, wrote, 'Mad dogs we knock on the head; the

fierce and savage ox we slay; unnatural progeny we destroy; we drown even children who at birth are weakly and abnormal. Yet it is not anger, but reason that separates the harmful from the sound'.

In the Roman republic, power was enshrined in the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*. He had, quite literally, the power of life and death over all his lawful possessions, in other words his slaves, children and wife. The earliest Roman law code permitted a father to expose any female infant he wished, and a deformed baby of either sex. Interestingly abortion came under greater official disapproval than infanticide. This was probably partly because it involved a risk to the mother's life and health, but also because it allowed married women to commit adultery without being discovered by their husbands, and perhaps because it was common practice of professional prostitutes. The secret performance of an abortion on a woman without the knowledge of her husband was viewed as a major offence against the 'property' of the husband. Nevertheless, abortion was extremely common in Rome and its dependent states from the first century BC onwards. Handbooks on techniques for abortion circulated quite freely.

Within the orthodox medical world, gynaecology developed as a separate discipline and a number of female physicians specialised in this art. Soranus, a Roman physician in the first and second centuries AD, wrote the earliest known treatise on gynaecology, which has been recently reprinted. He maintained that abortion was improper to conceal adultery or to maintain feminine beauty, but that it was permissible to save the woman's life. He also included a chapter entitled 'How to Recognise the Newborn That is Worth Rearing'. In it Soranus gives practical advice for midwives on the assessment of newborn babies immediately following delivery. First, the mother's health during pregnancy should be assessed, together with the gestational age of the infant. Subsequently the newborn baby is examined to see if 'when put on the earth it immediately cries with proper vigour', and also to ensure that 'it is perfect in all its parts, members and senses; that its ducts, namely of the ears, nose, pharynx, urethra, anus are free from obstruction; that the

natural functions of every member are neither sluggish nor weak; that the joints bend and stretch; that it has due size and shape and is properly sensitive in every respect...And by conditions contrary to those mentioned, the infant not worth rearing is recognised'.

Not all the classical philosophers and writers approved. In particular the Hippocratic oath prohibited the use of a pessary to procure an abortion. But it is clear that both abortion and infanticide were widely accepted.

It is possible to identify three underlying assumptions in the culture of the time. First was the belief that the value of an individual human life was not inherent, but was acquired some time after birth. No fetus or newborn child had an intrinsic right to life after birth. Second, it was assumed that the value of a life lay primarily in its usefulness, partly to the parents, but especially to the state as a future citizen. The healthy fetus or newborn baby was a future farmer, soldier or mother. Thus the value of the fetus or the newborn resided entirely in their *potential* to make a future contribution to society. If you could make no contribution then you were worthless. Finally, there was the generally accepted belief that health and physical wholeness were essential not only to survival but also to human dignity. In a culture that gloried in the 'masculine virtues', the weak, the disabled and the malformed were always likely to be seen as less than fully human.

If abortion was regarded as wrong, it was generally because of the risk to the mother's life, or because of the infringement of the father's property rights or the rights of some other interested party. If infanticide was wrong it was because of the risk of depopulation. No author seems to have raised the possibility that there was an *intrinsic* value to the life of a fetus or even of a newborn baby. It is clear that the apparent value to society of an unwanted fetus or a malformed or diseased newborn was minimal. It is interesting that whereas abortion was criticised from time to time, the morality of killing sickly or deformed newborns was hardly questioned. It is perhaps understandable that the medical treatment care of sick or defective babies appears to have been of no concern to

the medical profession, and that the physicians of the period concentrated their efforts on the adults whose lives were of obvious value and significance.

The Jewish and Christian worlds

The Old Testament period

The Jewish world of the same period displayed a radically different attitude to the fetus and newborn infant. There is no doubt that this stemmed from the teaching of the Old Testament law, the Torah. At the heart of the Jewish law was the doctrine of the image of God. Every human being, newborn or adult, deformed or healthy, slave or free, had an *intrinsic* value as a unique expression of God's image. The Torah taught that the deliberate destruction of any human life was an affront to the dignity of God (Genesis 9:6). The Mishnah, which enshrined traditional rabbinic teaching, declared that God created but a single man in order to teach mankind that 'whoever destroys a single individual God imputes it on him as if he had destroyed the entire world, and whoever saves the life of a single individual God imputes it on him as if he had saved the entire world'. (10)

In ancient Jewish thought the high value attached to human life extended to the fetus, which was the unique creation of Yahweh, formed for his own purpose. Nevertheless, the protection afforded to the fetus was not absolute. The rabbis taught that the fetus could be destroyed before birth if it was necessary to save the life of the mother. But from the moment of birth, once the head had emerged from the body of the mother, the baby was regarded as a full member of society with the same rights and protection as any fully grown person.

The second element in the condemnation of abortion and infanticide was the requirement given by God for the strong to protect the defenceless. Although the Torah does not contain many specific references to fetuses or babies, there is no doubt that they

were seen as especially vulnerable and therefore they were those whom God was concerned to protect from abuse. The pagan ritual of sacrificing children was explicitly condemned in the Old Testament Law (Deut 18:10) and the practice of infant exposure was, not surprisingly, viewed with abhorrence within Israel. Yet it was a sufficiently common practice in the surrounding nations to be referred to by the Old Testament prophets. In the book of Ezekiel, the infant nation of Israel, rejected by the surrounding nations, is graphically compared to a newborn baby 'thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised', and as lying on the ground 'kicking about in your blood' (Ezekiel 16:4-6).

Philo, a well known Jewish apologist, writing at the time of Christ, confirmed the orthodox Jewish view of child exposure when he stated that 'infanticide undoubtedly is murder, since the displeasure of the law is not concerned with ages but with a breach to the human race'. The Roman historian Tacitus, who frequently commented on the strange and exotic practices of foreigners, felt that the unusual attitude of the Jews to newborn infants was worthy of comment. He wrote, with an unmistakable air of astonishment, that infant exposure was unknown among Jews; in fact 'they regard it as a crime to kill any recently-born child'.

Jesus and the Early Church

Jesus affirmed the Old Testament view of the significance of babies and young children and in some senses he took a more radical position. Living in our modern child-orientated society we find it hard to appreciate just how revolutionary was Jesus' teaching that unless you become like a little child you cannot enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:1-4). Jesus taught that the 'welcoming' of a little child in Jesus' name was equivalent to welcoming Christ himself and the Father who sent him (Matt 18:5, Mark 9:36,37). Conversely those who caused a little child to 'stumble' would be punished with great severity (Matt 18:6). Jesus rebuked his disciples for preventing children from coming to

be blessed by him and went out of his way to make time for them (Matt 19:13-16, Mark 10:13-16).

Although there is no explicit reference to abortion or infanticide in the New Testament, the technical term *pharmakeia*, is found in lists of evil practices which are incompatible with Christian truth (e.g. Gal 5:20, Rev 21:8). The word is normally translated as 'sorcerers' or 'those who practice magic arts' in English translations of the New Testament. But *pharmakeia* was in fact a technical term referring to the use of drugs and it may well refer to those who employed herbal potions to poison or to obtain an abortion.

The *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* are early treatises on practical Christian living which date from the first two centuries AD. They contrasted two ways to live: the way of light and the way of darkness. The way of light is the way of neighbour-love and care for human life in all its forms. The way of darkness included murder, adultery, sodomy, fornication, the use of magic, and child destruction by abortion or infanticide. Abortion and infanticide are seen as clear examples of offences against the two great commandments referred to by Jesus, love of God and love of the neighbour.

The early church fathers uncompromisingly attacked the contemporary Graeco-Roman morality with its acceptance of the elimination of unwanted human life and its cruelty to the weak and despised. Whereas the Romans drew a distinction between abortion and infanticide, early Christians tended to speak of them both as 'parricide'. In the Roman world 'parricide' was the name given to the killing of a parent or close relative and it was regarded as the most shocking of crimes, because it was the most unnatural. It is very significant that Christians applied this scandalous term to both abortion and infanticide, equating the destruction of an unwanted child to the murder of a close relative.

The Early Church responses to abortion and infanticide

The consistent Christian teaching of the first three centuries, then, was total opposition to the pagan practices of abortion and infanticide. But the early Christians did not only oppose these practices; they saw the need to create practical alternatives. The rescue of orphans and foundlings was regarded by early Christians as a particular Christian duty, since it involved in many cases saving those babies who had been exposed by their parents. As the local population got to know about those Christians with their 'crazy' ideas, it was apparently quite common for mothers to leave their unwanted babies at the doors of churches in the hope that they would be cared for. Christians frequently adopted foundlings into their families, as shown by inscriptions on tombs, but as the numbers grew, Christian orphanages were set up in the third and fourth centuries.

It is fascinating to see how the laws of the Roman Empire gradually changed in the third and fourth centuries, at least partly in response to the growing Christian witness in their society. In AD 374 infanticide and infant exposure were made punishable by law and every parent was required to care for their own offspring. Christian hospitals began to be established towards the end of the fourth century AD and many of the hospitals had a section (called the *Brephotropheion*) specifically set apart for foundlings (16).

In summary the consistent teaching of the Old and New Testament and of the early church fathers is firstly that the value of the lives of all human beings, including fetuses and newborn babies, is *intrinsic* to their creation by God. And secondly there is an overwhelming duty on the followers of Christ to act with neighbour love towards the weak and vulnerable in society.

For modern Christian responses to abortion please see the two articles on the website johnwyatt.com:

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