



VFL: Understanding Abortion

Part 1: The Historical and Philosophical Background to Abortion

“Abortion is rationally emotional. Because abortion refers to deeply held beliefs about the life of a child and personal rights of a gender, it is always going to evoke emotion.”

- RC Sproul, *Abortion*

“The most bitterly contested public question in American Life”

- Carter Snead, *What it Means to be Human*

The Historical Background of Abortion

The issue of abortion does not start with Roe v. Wade, it doesn't start with America, in fact, it doesn't start with the New Testament (although that is where we will get our primary perspective from) rather, the issue of abortion starts with the beginning of human civilization.

- We find rules that govern abortion in antient Assyrian Law (Code of Assura - 1075BC - calling for the death penalty for women who get abortions agaistn a husbands will).
- “The first recorded evidence of induced abortion is from the Egyptian Ebers Papyrus in 1550 BCE” - *The Global Library of Women's Medicine*.
- A sandsrit document has been discovered describing an abortion by standing over boiling onions.

Common Origin

All of this is the case because of a reality that we read about all the way back with the first man and woman (Gen 1-3)

- God made the man and the woman in his image. He blessed them and told them to go forth and multiply.
- One of the sacred roles of humanity was to actually participate in creation - procreation.
- Rebellion against God and against each other.
- Curse that there will be pain in childbirth (blessing is in multiplication but now there is curse in childbirth)
- Uneven power between man and woman.

All of the above creates an environment where killing the unborn child may be desired. As human civilization expanded, that particular broken situation emerged and we have a record of it in archaeology, laws and philosophies of Indian, Persian, Egyptian societies... as well as Greek and Roman histories.

Greek Philosophy and Abortion

Most Greek physicians opposed all nontherapeutic abortions:

I swear by Apollo Physician, by Asclepius, by Health, by Panacea, and by all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this indenture...I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing. Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. Similarly, I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion."

- Oath of Hippocrates (460-357 BC)

If Medical ethics opposed abortion, social and philosophical ethics endorsed it in some cases. “Greeks enjoy the dubious distinction of being the first [in the Ancient Near East or Western world] positively to advise or even demand abortion in certain cases”¹

Plato (427-347 BC) wrote in his *Republic* that women who get pregnant after 40 needed to get abortions:

A woman, I said, at twenty years of age may begin to bear children to the State, and continue to bear them until forty...And we grant all this, accompanying the permission with strict orders to prevent any [subsequent] embryo which may come into being from seeing the light, and if any force a way to birth, the parents must understand that the offspring of such an union can not be maintained, and arrange accordingly.

“Here Plato recommends both abortion and infanticide when ‘necessary.’ Although he believed that the fetus is a living being, the state’s ideals and needs take precedence over the life and rights of the unborn.” (Gorman).

Aristotle (384-322 BC) in his *Politics* talks about “the most desirable form of life” for the individual and the state.

Let there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared; but 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 practiced 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.

¹ Michael Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish and Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World*. (IVP, Downers Grove), 1982. I lean heavily on Gorman’s excellent little book on the history of abortion.

Why did both Plato and Aristotle support abortion? Each held a utilitarian view of the individual, born or unborn, seeing that individual as existing for the state...All rights - even the right to life - were subordinated to the welfare of the state and had to be sacrificed if the best interests of the state demanded it (Gorman).

The Stoics believed that the fetus is part of the mother and that life begins only with the fully developed infant taking its first breath. Given this viewpoint, one would expect the stoics not to have opposed abortion, butRufus referred to abortion as “detrimental to the common good” and an act of impiety; he approved of the laws against it.” Stoics believed in large families....Romans will adopt and expand on the Stoic concepts of abortion.

But Plato, Aristotle and Stoics believed the child as subject to the state.

Roman Philosophy and Laws about Abortion

Plutarch - Plutarch's first-century AD account of the laws of Rome by its namesake, Romulus, was just cause for a husband's divorcing his wife because she used poisonous drugs. Reflects typical Roman view of abortion as an offense against the husband and father. The legal and moral climate of the Roman Republic was in fact determined by the power of the father (*paterfamilias*).

The Twelve Tables (450 BC) - In the earliest Roman law code, The Twelve Tables permitted a father to expose any female infact he wished and any deformed baby of either sex. The Twelve Tables proposed social and political censure for husbands who ordered or permitted their wives to abort without good reason, but no fines or penalties were exacted from them.

Lex Cornelia of 81 BC - Roman law never viewed the fetus as a human being but rather as part of the maternal viscera. But after a period of revolution the Lex Cornelia of 81 BC was enacted against assassins and poisoners. The late Republic enacted a law to punish sellers of abortifacient drugs but not because

they caused abortions. Roman law did not consider the fetus a person, so there could be no law to protect rights which did not exist (Gorman).

Cicero (106-43 BC) - He called for capital punishment for deliberate abortion. His apparent wish to enforce criminal penalties for abortion is based on its injustice to the father, the family name, the family's inheritance rights, and the human race and the state. He makes no reference to harm to the mother or the fetus; Cicero is reflecting a view Roman approach to abortion.

"Roman Empire Roman law adopted the Stoic view that the unborn is not human. Thus the state became pro-family but not fundamentally anti-abortion." (Gorman)

Rich women in Roman society got abortions, poor ones didn't:

Juvenal (57-127 AD) "Poor women...endure the perils of childbirth, and all the troubles of nursing to which their lot condemns them; but how often does a gilded bed contain a woman that is lying in it? So great is the skill, so powerful the drugs, of the abortionist, paid to murder mankind within the womb."

Rufus (Stoic) "Roman Socrates" wrote in *Discourse 15* "should every child that is born be raised?" He argued that having many children is beautiful and right. Abortion is against nature and of sex and the logic of large families, which also provide men with more power and influence. Abortion...is there an offense against the gods, the family and nature, but not against the fetus. The Stoics continued to believe that life begins only at birth."

Jewish Philosophy and Laws about Abortion

"The Jewish world has no mention of nontherapeutic abortion in any text of the Hebrew Bible or other Jewish literature through 500 AD" (Gorman).

It was a given of Jewish thought and life that abortion, like exposure, was unacceptable, and this was well known in the ancient world. Key assumptions: duty and desire to populate the earth and ensure Jewish survival and divine presence. A deep sense of the sanctity of life as God's creation, a respect extending in various ways to life in all its manifestations and stages. And finally a profound horror of blood and bloodshed.

Josephus, *Against Apion* (50ADish)

The Law orders all the offspring to be brought up, and forbids women either to cause abortion or to make away with the foetus; a woman convicted of this is regarded as an infanticide, because she destroys a soul and diminishes the race."

Rabbinic debate over bloodshed "in humans"

Gen 9:6 reads, "whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed."

But there was rabbinic debate about this translation. Some thought it was better to read the Hebrew in the following way.

Gen 9:6 "whoever sheds human blood *in humans* shall their blood be shed"

Debate over Exodus 21:22-25, "harm" or "form"?

If men strive together and strike a pregnant woman so that her child comes out of her, but there is no harm, [the guilty one] will surely be fined according to what the woman's husband demands of him, and he will pay according to the judges' decision. But if there is harm, then you must give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

(Gorman's translation from the Hebrew text used by the Septuagint translators)

If two men fight and they strike a woman who is pregnant, and her child comes out while not yet fully formed, the one liable to punishment will be fined; whatever the woman's husband imposes, he will give as is fitting. But if it is fully formed, he will give life for life. (Septuagint)

Philo, *Special Laws* 3.108-9

If a man comes to blows with a pregnant woman and strikes her on the belly and she miscarries, then, if the result of the miscarriage is unshaped and undeveloped, he must be fined both for the outrage and for obstructing the artist Nature in her creative work of bringing into life the fairest of living creatures, man. But, if the offspring is already shaped and all the limbs have their proper qualities and places in the system, he must die, for that which answers to this description is a human being, which he has destroyed in the laboratory of Nature who judges that the hour has not yet come for bringing it out into the light, like a statue lying in a studio requiring nothing more than to be conveyed outside and released from confinement.

Early Church Response to Abortion

There is no obvious prohibition to abortion in the New Testament. However, the use of the word *pharmakeia* and the early church is important to note. The term was widely used to describe abortifacient drugs. “The word *pharmakeia* itself, then, can mean the use of drugs, evil or magical drugs themselves, or a specific evil drug such as a poison or an abortifacient”

Galatians 5:19-20

¹⁹The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft [*pharmakeia*]; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Rev 21:8 ⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers [*pharmakeia*], idolaters,

and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Rev 22:15 ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and sorcerers [*pharmakeia*] and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

Didache and the “Two Ways” (70 AD)

Chapter 1. The Two Ways and the First Commandment. There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways. The way of life, then, is this: First, you shall love God who made you; second, love your neighbor as yourself, and do not do to another what you would not want done to you.And the second commandment of the Teaching; 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.

Epistle of Barnabas (80-120 AD)

19:5 Thou shalt love thy neighbor more than thine own soul. Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion, nor again shalt thou kill it when it is born. Thou shalt not withhold thy hand from thy son or daughter, but from their youth thou shalt teach them the fear of God.

“The fetus is seen, not as a part of its mother, but as a neighbor. Abortion is rejected as contrary to other-centered neighbor love” (Gorman)

Clement of Alexandria (150-215AD)

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 matter completely dead, abort at the same time their human feelings.”

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

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.

-De Nube et Concupiscentia 1.17 (15)