

1-1-1986

Genesis and Abortion: An Exegetical Test of a Biblical Warrant in Ethics

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NOTES

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Contemporary theologians frequently emphasize the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2 as a foundation for pastoral and ethical discussions. In this they are following the NT example of Jesus preserved in the Synoptic sayings on divorce. In Mk 10:1-12/par. Mt 19:1-12, Jesus is faced with the ethical, legal, and pastoral question of divorce. The discussion cites the law of Moses which allows divorce. In Mark, Jesus criticizes this law as a concession to human hardness of heart, and contrasts human ways with how God created things to be in the beginning: "But from the beginning of creation 'God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mk 10:6-9 RSV).

The argumentation here is very important for Christians. It avoids the tunnel vision of both casuistry and overly individualistic personalism, which can lose the larger perspective of God's will for creation and the common good. It seeks God's plan for human behavior and Christian stewardship to ground ethical arguments. And it does this by appealing to the authority of the Genesis creation story, as truly revealing the mind of God for both human and subhuman creation.¹

People on various points in the ideological spectrum have recently appealed to the creation story. For example, two closely-related 1983 documents of the United Presbyterian Church use human dominion over creation in Gen 1:26-28 and its context as a justification for sometimes choosing abortion as necessary for responsible stewardship over creation.²

¹ Cf. Anthony J. Tambasco, "The Bible and Nuclear War: A Case Study in Methodology for Christian Biblical Ethics," *BTB* 13, no. 3 (July 1983) 75-81, at 75, on how a CBA task force agreed that contemporary exegesis too must go beyond "what the text meant" in historical criticism to "what the text means" for ethics today (75), and how reading the Bible as story can help in this (76-77). Cf. also *Christian Biblical Ethics. From Biblical Revelation to Contemporary Christian Praxis: Method and Content*, written and ed. by Robert J. Daly, S.J., with J. A. Fischer, C.M., T. J. Keegan, O.P., and A. J. Tambasco, et al., in consultation with the CBA Task Force (New York: Paulist, 1984).

² "The Covenant of Life and the Caring Community" and "Covenant and Creation: Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion" (New York: Office of the [195th] General Assembly, 1983), the United Presbyterian position papers on abortion and related health-care issues. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), to which this paper almost exclusively refers for its exegetical base.

From a very different perspective, Pope John Paul II based his encyclical on work, *Laborem exercens*, and a long series of homilies on sexual ethics and marriage on the description in Genesis of the way things were created to be.³

Both the Presbyterian and the papal arguments appeal to the authority of the Genesis accounts because they reveal the Creator's will for creation.⁴ Let us exegetically test in its biblical context an example of an appeal to Gen 1:26–28 as scriptural warrant for a contemporary position on abortion, to illustrate problems and principles for finding biblical grounding for ethical conclusions.

This article will have two parts: (1) I shall offer a critique of the Presbyterian documents' arguments from Gen 1:26–28 which is based on its immediate context of the whole primeval history (Gen 1–11); (2) I shall raise further questions in light of the biblical canon and of other scriptural themes relevant to the question of abortion which those arguments overlooked.

GENESIS 1:26–28 IN CONTEXT: HUMAN DOMINION OVER CREATION

Ethicists have frequently emphasized the human dominion over creation in these verses in reference to a variety of contemporary questions, e.g., human labor, use of world resources and ecology, contraception, and abortion. Gen 1:26 refers to humans as in the image of God, having godlike dominion over the earth.⁵ Gen 1:28 commissions humans to fill

³ The homilies on sex and marriage are published as *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis*, by John Paul II (Boston: St. Paul, 1981). For critiques and discussion of the use of Genesis in *Laborem exercens*, see Part 1: "The Theology of Co-Creation," in *Co-Creation and Capitalism: John Paul II's Laborem exercens*, ed. John W. Houck and Oliver F. Williams, C.S.C. (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1983) esp. David Hollenbach, S.J., "Human Work and the Story of Creation: Theology and Ethics in *Laborem exercens*" (59–77), and Stanley Hauerwas, "Work As Co-Creation: A Critique of a Remarkably Bad Idea" (42–58).

⁴ Another example of use of Genesis 1 to argue for ecology is Gena Hens-Piazza, "A Theology of Ecology: God's Image and the Natural World," *BTB* 13, no. 4 (Oct. 1983) 107–10, which borrows heavily from Brueggemann. One of her main points is that human lordship over creation must image God's, which ecologically respects, not rapes, creation. Unfortunately, one point of dependence is on Brueggemann's questionable exegesis of "Let there be" in the words of creation as inviting rather than commanding (109 twice). Yet the grammatical form is third person imperative.

⁵ Henri Blocher, *Révélation des origines: Le début de la Genèse* (Lausanne: Presses Bibliques Universitaires, 1979) chap. 4, "En image de Dieu" 72–88, esp. 73–74, lists four main lines of interpretation of how humans are in the image of God here: (1) by their spirituality or reason (cf. Wis 2:23 as incorruptible), not held by many exegetes today; (2) as in Sir 17:2–4 (ET), image is related to dominion and humans representing God; (3) Luther: original justice, lost in the fall, awaiting restoration (Col 3:10, cf. Eph 4:24); (4) Karl Barth: refers to sexuality ("image of God, male and female").

and subdue the earth, and rule over the lesser creatures. The Hebrew for "subdue" is *kibšūhāh*, the Greek *katakyrieusate*. The Hebrew for "rule" is *rādū*, the Greek *archete*. The Hebrew root *kābaš*, as indicated in Brown-Driver-Briggs's listings of usage and its treatment of the word, has the notions of subdue, bring into bondage or slavery, dominate (in conquest), tread down.⁶ The Greek words for dominion in the LXX are also quite strong, especially *katakyrieusate*, "dominate over," "lord it over." The Hebrew for "rule," *rādāh*, and its Semitic cognates have overtones of having dominion, dominate, chastise,⁷ and are often used for royal rule, which then was absolute.⁸ The Greek *archō* and cognate *archōn* are also strong words for ruling and ruler.

There can be no doubt that these verses commission humans to rule authoritatively over the rest of creation. But are there limits to this rule? Recent ecological articles have shown that there are, and the Presbyterian document acknowledges this limitation for ecology. Humans are to rule as God's image and representative, according to God's will, as stewards and not absolute masters, with respect for the creation they rule.⁹

The very context of the commission puts limits on human dominion. The fact that this dominion is a gift from God to the humans He has created imposes the implied limits of God's will on human dominion. These implied limits are further underscored in Gen 1:29–30, where God gives humans only vegetable life for food, not animal life (that comes only after the flood in Genesis 9).¹⁰

⁶ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968 [1907]) 461 (henceforth BDB); cf. the examples of usage in Solomon Mandelkern, *Veteris Testamenti Concordantiae Hebraicae atque Chaldaicae* (8th rev. ed.; Jerusalem: Schocken, 1969) 531. *Kābaš* "connotes absolute subjugation," according to Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977) 60, citing Jer 34:11,16; Zech 9:15; Neh 5:5; 2 Chr 28:10. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 163, cites the meanings "subjection of a country through war" (Num 32:22,29), "subjugation of peoples" (2 Sam 8:1), "of slaves" (Neh 5:5), and even "the raping of women" (Est 7:8), and implying use of force (Jos 18:1).

⁷ BDB 921–22.

⁸ E.g., Vawter, *Genesis* 57–58, links *rādāh* with kingship (1 Kgs 5:4, Pss 72:8, 110:2, Isa 14:6, Ezek 34:4) and technical language for the kind of absolute royal rule implied in "putting all things under his feet" (Ps 8:6).

⁹ Cf. Hens-Piazza, "Theology of Ecology"; Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 85–88; Brueggemann, *Genesis* 32–33; "Covenant of Life" 3; Vawter, *Genesis* 58; Michael Maher, M.S.C., *Genesis* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1982) 29–30; James Barr, "Man and Nature: The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 55 (1972–73) 9–32; and Bernhard W. Anderson, "Human Dominion over Nature," in Miriam Ward, R.S.M., ed., *Biblical Studies in Contemporary Thought* (Somerville, Mass.: Greeno, Hadden, 1975) 27–45.

¹⁰ "No shedding of blood within the animal kingdom, and no murderous action by man! This word of God, therefore, means a significant limitation in the human right of dominion.

The implied limits to human dominion become explicit in the second creation story, Gen 2:8–9, 15–17, which from NT times the Church (as the Synagogue before it) tended to read in conjunction with the first and as interpreting the first.¹¹ There the Creator explicitly limits human freedom with a direct prohibition under penalty of death: God tells the man he is free to eat of any tree except the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

When the serpent in Genesis 3 tests this prohibition, the limits to man's and woman's dominion stand out with the strongest possible emphasis. The essence of the serpent's temptation is that "when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5 RSV). The sin of the first humans was precisely in wanting to be "like God" or "like gods" (depending on one's translation of the Hebrew *k'elohîm*; the Greek OT reads "like gods," *hōs theoi*). Although in Genesis God created humans in His image and gave them dominion over nature, He imposed definite limits on the extent to which they were to image God, have dominion, even to have knowledge. Human desire to exceed this limit, this gulf between God and the humans He created in His image, was the essence of the primeval temptation and sin in Genesis 3. The theology of human dominion in God's image in the Presbyterian documents does not recognize this gulf between God and His human creatures, especially in the areas of human knowledge in Genesis 3 and of taking innocent human life, so strongly emphasized in Genesis 4 and 9.¹² Therefore that theology of dominion misses some of

The age of Noah knows other orders of life (Gen. 9.2)" (Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961] 59). Cf. Anderson, "Human Dominion" 44–45.

¹¹ Thus, the Jesus-saying on divorce in Mk 10:6–7 quotes Gen 1:27 (from P) and then Gen 2:24 (from J) as if they were one scriptural quotation. Though the parallel Mt 19:4–5 inserts "and he said" before quoting Gen 2:24, the two creation stories are still used together to make one argument against divorce.

¹² The Presbyterian documents are only cited as one example of such arguments for abortion from Genesis. Cf. "Sex, Marriage, and Family" (Social Statements of the Lutheran Church in America), adopted by the 1970 LCA convention (available from Board of Social Ministry, LCA, 231 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016): "Nevertheless, a qualitative distinction must be made between its [the fetus's] claims and the rights of a responsible person made in God's image who is in living relationships with God and other human beings. This understanding of responsible personhood is congruent with the historical Lutheran teaching and practice whereby only living persons are baptized. On the basis of the evangelical ethic, a woman or couple may decide responsibly to seek an abortion" (4–5). Conditions are similar to those in the Presbyterian documents: mother's health, responsibilities to others, stage of the fetus, home stability, laws, consequences for society. Other churches use similar arguments, but their documents were not available to me at the time of writing.

the main dynamics of the creation and fall stories of Genesis on which it claims to be based.¹³

To interpret the P creation story by stories in J raises the methodological question of historical and canonical criticism. The Synagogue and Church tended to use and read Genesis as a canonical whole. They did not isolate J, E, D, P, and read them independently of one another. Before the era of source criticism, the authority of Scripture for ethics had to be based on the canonical books, not reconstructed sources taken out of their biblical context. In the view of Vatican II, Scripture as canon, rather than isolated sources, continues to be authoritative for ethics.¹⁴

It is true that one of the geniuses of the canon, especially that of the OT, is to preserve texts and strands in tension with one another, thus giving a variety of approaches. But it is also true that some texts were only considered acceptable for the canon when additions were made to them (e.g., the "happy ending" to Job or the ending moderating Qoheleth's cynicism).

In other words, there was a limit to the pluralism acceptable to any believing community. Nor was pluralism in itself considered a value in NT times the way it sometimes is today. One of the main concerns of midrashic forms of exegesis is to find the expected underlying unity in God's word. It was ordinary procedure to interpret Genesis 1 and 2 together. Not until the Enlightenment did the churches begin to read strands of Genesis in isolation from one another.¹⁵

Not only must ethicists treat the whole Genesis creation account and primeval history as a unit; they must also avoid taking one biblical theme

¹³ Similarly, Hollenbach ("Human Work" 74-75) criticizes *Laborem exercens* for relying too heavily on the more "metaphysical" P account of creation, without enough balance from the J version, which better expresses the nonideal aspects of human work.

¹⁴ "But since sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind, no less attention must be devoted to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, taking into account the Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith, if we are to derive their true meaning from the sacred texts" (*Dei Verbum*, no. 12, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. [Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1975] 758). Cf. n. 1 above and the discussion and note to follow.

¹⁵ Cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament As Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 149-50: "It has become increasingly obvious that a complex literary history preceded the present structure. Yet it is also clear that the present order has often assigned a different role to a passage from that which it originally performed. A classic example of this canonical shaping is found in Gen. 1 and 2. It is hardly necessary to rehearse . . . the two creation accounts of P(1.1-2.4a) and J(2.4b-3.24). . . . However . . . the two originally different accounts have not been simply juxtaposed in Genesis as two parallel creation stories. To read them in this fashion as has usually been done (cf. Vawter's recent commentary) disregards the essential effect of the canonical shaping which has assigned the chapters different roles within the new context of the book of Genesis.

out of context from the interrelated themes that the canon provides. To focus on human dominion and stewardship over creation and to ignore the fact that only subhuman creation is so subjected to human dominion could be carelessness. Also, despite questions about when the conceived human life becomes a person, commonly-known arguments against abortion claim that it is the taking of innocent human life. Genetic facts unknown to earlier theologians like Thomas Aquinas are clear that the zygote from the moment of conception has the total genetic make-up it will carry till death. It is clearly human life and not any other kind of life, and a later argument will show that it is loved by God, who has a purpose and destiny for that human life. Questions like the moment of ensoulment can distract from this central truth.¹⁶ One cannot simply ignore the very strong biblical prohibitions against taking innocent human life, as well as the heavy penalties for such killing, in citing 'dominion as a justification for abortion.'¹⁷

¹⁶ "The introductory formula in 2.4 makes it clear that J's account has now been subordinated to P's account of the creation . . . [I]n spite of the partial overlapping . . . ch. 2 performs a basically different role from ch. 1 in unfolding the history of mankind as the intended offspring of the creation of the heavens and the earth. . . . By continuing to speak of the 'two creation accounts of Genesis' the interpreter disregards the canonical shaping and threatens its role both as literature and as scripture."

¹⁶ For a gathering of many ancient and mediaeval opinions on the time of ensoulment, see Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., *The Image of God in Man according to Cyril of Alexandria* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1957) 127-28, esp. n. 9.

¹⁷ From a biblical perspective, the primary question is therefore not when the fetus becomes a person. As Tertullian put it in his *Apologeticus* 9, 6-8, "It makes no difference whether one takes away life once born or destroys it as it comes to birth. He is a man who is to be a man; the fruit is always present in the seed" (cited in T. C. Smith, "Abortion: A Biblical Perspective," in *Seminar on Abortion* [Catholic-Baptist dialogue], ed. Claude U. Broach [Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest Univ. Ecumenical Institute, 1975] 37-48, at 46). We shall see that the Bible clearly shows God's role in the creation of human life and His plans for human lives even before and certainly from their conception. Cf. Kevin D. O'Rourke, O.P., "Some Theological and Ethical Perspectives of the Teachings of the Catholic Church in Regard to Abortion," in Broach, *Seminar on Abortion* 59-68, at 61-64.

For completeness, I add the summary of positions in the Catholic commentary on the Catholic-Reformed abortion statement: "Among the more common assessments as to when the fetus possesses personhood might be included the following: 1. fertilization—the moment of the joining of the sperm and ovum to create a unique zygote with its own genetic code; 2. implantation—5-8 days after fertilization when the fetus implants itself in the uterine wall; 3. neo-cortex—at approximately 5 weeks when the neo-cortex, indispensable for human activity, begins to appear and develop; 4. formation—after about 7 weeks when the fetus is formed and looks like a human being; 5. quickening—the first detectable movement of the fetus in the womb: 14-20 weeks; 6. viability—somewhere between 20 and 28 weeks when the infant can survive outside the womb; 7. birth—when the child begins its natural life outside the womb.

"Roman Catholics today, with some exceptions, appear to agree that human life begins at conception. In the past, however, and for several centuries, there was general agreement

The Cain and Abel story follows immediately upon the disobedience and punishment of humans in Genesis 3. From NT times, this story has been interpreted as focused on the heinousness of taking innocent human life.¹⁸ For the Presbyterian document to focus almost exclusively on the question of Cain's choice in treating Gen 4:1-16 seems a peculiarity of our own age.¹⁹ Since the main objection to abortion is that it is the taking of innocent human life, the question of whether abortion is this and what the Bible says about it has to be considered in turning to Scripture for guidance.

Within the primeval history alone (Gen 1-11) there are very **explicit** statements about human life as belonging to God alone and **therefore** sacred and not under human control or dominion. There are also **strong** statements about the unjustified taking of human life beyond the story of Cain. In Gen 9:5-6, the "new creation" after the flood, God gives humans subhuman animals for food for the first time, but has a **stern** warning against shedding human blood: "For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in **His own image**" (Gen 9:5-6 RSV).

It could hardly be clearer that although humans have been **given** renewed dominion over subhuman creation (Gen 9:2-3, though the Gen 9:4 prohibition against eating flesh with blood in it explicitly limits even this dominion), God clearly draws the line on dominion before the **taking** of innocent human life. The word "innocent" does not appear in the passage, but Gen 9:6 gives death as the penalty for the guilty human who takes human life, clearly contrasting shedding of blood as crime from shedding of blood as punishment, as do the death penalties sanctioning misdeeds in the Code of the Covenant. The death penalty is a sign of the seriousness with which the text takes the evil of killing human beings.

that human life began at the time of formation. It was only with the discovery of the ovum and sperm, and the gradual identification of conception with fertilization, that immediate hominization began to be generally accepted. As already pointed out, the fetus was considered sacred and inviolable right from the time of conception because it had a human destiny. When it actually became a human being was of secondary importance . . ." (*Ethics and the Search for Christian Unity* [Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1981] 17-22, at 20).

¹⁸ Thus, the parallel Mt 23:35/Lk 11:51 refer to "the blood of Abel the righteous"; 1 Jn 3:12 emphasizes the righteousness of the works of Abel whom Cain slew; and Heb 11:4 stresses Abel's righteousness and alludes to his blood still speaking (Gen 4:10), which Heb 12:24 compares to Jesus' blood: "and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel." By NT times the blood of the innocent Abel is a biblical *topos*.

¹⁹ "The Covenant of Life" 4, and Brueggemann, *Genesis* 57-60; cf. esp. Brueggemann's emphasis on the obscure verse Gen 4:7, sin's urge for Cain but he must master it.

And the reason for this seriousness is explicit: "for God made man in His own image" (9:6b RSV).

Proabortion arguments appeal to the fact that humans are in the image of God in the sense of having divine choice and dominion over nature.²⁰ But Gen 9:6b uses the fact that humans are in God's image for the very opposite purpose: as an argument against taking human life, not as an authorization for humans to take other innocent humans' lives. This abuse of the immediate context in treating the theme of image illustrates the methodological need to keep focused on the text, not on so-called biblical themes treated in isolation from both text and context.

FURTHER CANONICAL EVIDENCE PERTINENT TO ABORTION

Bruce Waltke has argued that the notion of humans as fashioned by God in the image of God applies also to the human fetus in such passages as Gen 5:3, Job 10:8–12, Pss 51:5–6 and 139:13–17.²¹ To abstract a biblical theme of God's image as a basis of ethical arguments, one must take into account all the canonical texts relevant to that theme and to the issue at hand.

A standard treatment of OT anthropology by Hans Walter Wolff shows the kind of mentality toward birth that lies behind such passages as Ps 139:13–17 and Job 10:3, 8–12.²² Such texts exhibit the mentality of the mysterious origins of human life in God. Psalm 139 applies the views of creation of humans in Genesis to creation by God of each person (Isa 17:7). God has "woven me together in my mother's womb. . . . Thine eyes beheld me in my primal form" (Ps 139:13, 16 Wolff trans.). "What developed in the 'hidden places' (v. 15) does not derive from the designs and capacities of man; only the God who created it in secret also knows it, through and through, from the very beginning. His eyes already saw the embryo, the worshipper's germinal form."²³

Job 10 also rests on the presupposition that "Thy hand fashioned and made me . . . as of clay" (Job 10:8–9 Wolff), which applies Gen 2:7 to the individual's creation by God. Job 10:10 uses a striking image for what ancients could observe about physiology: "Didst thou not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese?" (RSV). It refers to God's agency the pouring out of the seminal fluid into the female organism and development of an embryonic body following insemination. "It is all the more important that, in its own way, it does not trace the proceeding

²⁰ "Covenant of Life" 3.

²¹ Bruce K. Waltke, "Reflections from the Old Testament on Abortion," *JEvThS* 19 (winter 1976) 3–13.

²² Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* 96–98.

²³ *Ibid.* 96.

that leads to birth back to the will of father or mother, or both, but says: 'Didst *thou* not pour me out like milk . . .?'²⁴

This relating of God's creation to the lives of individuals underlies several strands of the OT. It shows a biblical mentality that sees all human existence as from the hand of God, who formed us from the womb. Humans have no choice or decision in being so formed, as perplexed sufferers like Job (and Jeremiah in 20:16-18) lament. The womb is seen as a mysterious time where God has full reign in shaping the individual's life.

This notion of God forming humans from the womb is also the presupposition behind several call narratives in the prophets and the NT. The focus in those narratives is on how God has configured the personhood of the prophet to his prophetic vocation. Jer 1:5 is one example (cf. also Lk 1:15, Gal 1:15): "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."

For the question of abortion, the presuppositions and mentality behind such statements are more pertinent than the specific vocation of prophet, which only some people have. The verses make no distinction between the "you" in the womb and the "you" of the prophet. Especially in view of the biblical anthropological notions we have discussed, they presuppose that behind the call to this person lies God's forming of all humans in the womb. But even this special call is given before the person is born, while still in the womb. If God makes each human in the womb, and if he configures the personhood of some individuals to their vocation as prophet, it is not out of step with biblical world views to argue that God probably has a plan for each human He makes, even while He is in the process of forming him or her in the womb. Such images of God's foreordained plan for individuals correspond to such central biblical themes as God's OT promises and to NT statements like Rom 8:28-30.

The prophetic allusion to divine vocation from the womb in Isa 49:1-6 figures heavily in NT treatments of the vocations of Christ and Paul, as in Luke-Acts (Lk 2:32, Acts 13:47, 26:23). Especially influential are the verses "The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother He named my name" (Isa 49:1 RSV), and "the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be His servant, to bring Jacob back to Him . . ." (Isa 49:5 RSV). Such statements as these give further evidence of the attitude that human life is a gift from God, who has a plan for the humans He creates. This plan is sometimes mentioned even before conception, and certainly is implied from the beginning of the individual's

²⁴ Ibid. 97.

existence as an individual, i.e., at conception. But if God has a plan for humans from the womb, which is viewed as the place of God's work in shaping human life, this is relevant evidence against the right of other humans to abort God's plan by killing the fetus God has chosen and to whom God has given life.

Even more pervasive than the notion that God makes individual human lives with His purpose for those lives is the related biblical theme of God's initiating love, as exemplified in Eph 1:3–6. God loves us before we can love Him: this is the foundation of salvation by faith, not by works. God's foreordaining love is behind the whole scheme of salvation history and preparation for the Messiah. This pattern of initiating love begins with the very creation of humankind in Gen 1:26: "Let us make *adam* in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air. . . ."

It is a small step from God's call of an individual to His creating that individual in the womb in view of that call. This is even foreshadowed in the creation of woman from man in the second creation story. "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a partner suitable for him" (Gen 1:18). Creating an individual in the womb in view of God's call is the pattern behind God's promises to Abraham to give him Isaac and descendants and to bless them.

Even for those theologies that view the image of God as a result of covenant and relationship rather than biological beginning of life, Scripture shows that God has a love for, and a relationship and covenant with, humans from the moment He creates them—which is the reason why He creates them at all. If there is a relationship and covenant between God and that individual, there is no need for an *added* covenant from the mother or other human. It is already in the image of God by virtue of God's covenant with it. As the Presbyterian-Reformed commentary on the Catholic-Reformed statement on abortion puts it, "Through relationships of expectation the *person* may exist even before conception. . . ." Such a relationship of expectation always exists between God and the person He creates. Therefore the other possibility never obtains: "On the other extreme, a *person* may not be alive in the fetus, unknown, unwanted, unexpected, and unrelated. The Reformed understanding of personality depends less upon nature, and more upon covenantal grace. Not conception, but covenant is definitive of personhood."²⁵ Our belief

²⁵ *Ethics and Search for Unity* 27. The consequences of this position include a grotesque utilitarianism about who will be considered a human person and allowed to live, and who will not and be put to death. The Reformed commentary continues: "Consequently, physiological or natural factors play a minor role in the Reformed definition of personhood. In their place a multitude of relational factors are considered. Examples are the health of the mother and the family; . . . the parental readiness for family obligations; the supportive

in God as creating all human life means there is *never* a situation of a fetus that is "unknown, unwanted, unexpected, and unrelated" to God its creator. All human conception implies God's initiating covenant with and gift to His human creature.²⁶

This emphasis on God's calling of and destiny for the fetus is clearly picked up and implied in the Lucan accounts of the conceptions and births of John the Baptist and Jesus. From the moment when John's conception is announced, he is being prepared for the role of a prophet who will make ready a people for the Lord (Lk 1:17): "he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Lk 1:15 RSV). From the moment of Jesus' conception, God plans for him to be His Son who will reign over Israel forever (Lk 1:32-33). The prophecy about the Baptist being filled with the Spirit from the womb is fulfilled when Elizabeth greets the pregnant Mary, asks why "the mother of my Lord should come to me" and says "the babe in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk 1:43, 44 RSV). There can be no doubt that these stories give evidence that the writer and first-century Church viewed the fetuses as having all the human dignity for which they were being prepared from conception. And this is the main reason for the universal Christian prohibition against abortion in the first three centuries.²⁷

Clement of Alexandria shows that at least some teachers in the early Church so read these Lucan passages. In his *Prophetic Eclogues* he quotes

capacities of parents, siblings, and friends; the vocational commitments of the family; . . . and consequences for the community" (27). The Jewish holocaust illustrates the dangers of similar utilitarian reasoning about who shall or shall not be considered persons.

²⁶ Cf. O'Rourke, "Theological and Ethical Perspectives" 61-64: "The theological reasoning for the Church's teaching concerning abortion is founded upon the premise that God is the author of life and that a unique relationship between each individual and God results from the act of creation. Biblical theology is replete with symbols and principles which confirm this relationship and which point out the depth of this relationship. God's love is creative, and each individual human being is loved by God in a unique manner. . . . The value of a human life is ultimately grounded in the value God placed on it. . . . When God establishes a covenant with an individual through his creative love, the intimate relationship between God and the individual must be respected. The individual must be allowed to live out his purpose in God's plan in freedom and dignity. . . . Man does not have the right to terminate innocent human life in any form, nor does he have the right to take his own life. . . . 'Sanctity of life' implies that God has touched man in a personal and lasting manner by reason of the fact that he gives him life. . . . [A]nd thus man is in the image of God. . . . The right to live, or the sanctity of life, is not dependent upon the quality of life. . . . Indeed, we sometimes see the beauty of the human spirit more clearly in those who are 'useless,' or in their families, than we do in the so-called normal people. . . . But man must let God be God, so that man can be man, and he should not try to usurp the power of God as Lord of life."

²⁷ Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion & the Early Church: Christian, Jewish & Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1982) passim.

an anonymous mid-second-century writer who argues that the fetus has a soul and is a human person. Michael Gorman comments:

Clement records that this writer's proofs that the embryo is alive are the references in Luke 1 to John the Baptist and Jesus in their mothers' wombs. He makes particular use of Luke 1:41: "And when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb." Though the writer focuses on the Baptist and does not even mention abortion, he laid the groundwork for subsequent theological links between abortion and the Incarnation.²⁸

CONCLUSION

I have taken, as an exegetical test, one example of ethical argumentation from the creation accounts in Genesis 1–2, that which uses the dominion of the human image of God in Gen 1:26–28 to justify abortion. We have seen the methodological necessity of consulting the canonical context and not just isolated source strands. We have seen problems in isolating biblical themes like dominion and God's image from the stories and contexts in which they occur. We have found conflicts between arguments for abortion from human dominion as God's image and the limitations on human freedom in the same creation and fall stories, where the primeval sin was to try to be like gods or God. We have found conflicts also with the canonical themes of human life as belonging to God alone and sacred and forbidden to humans to take (themes present in the same primeval history), and of God's forming, electing, and calling individuals even in the womb (from other parts of Scripture). Such conflicts undercut these appeals to biblical themes for justification of abortion and illustrate the need for more canonical controls in seeking biblical warrants in contemporary ethics.

This article is primarily focused on the methodological question of uses of Scripture in ethics and the need for greater completeness in the biblical evidence assessed, not on the ethical example of abortion chosen to illustrate the methodological issue. Therefore the article does not claim that the scriptural evidence presented solves all contemporary questions regarding abortion; it acknowledges the need for ethical reasoning on such evidence. It rather tries to show how a fairly typical appeal to scriptural warrants needs to be more thoroughly grounded in the major

²⁸ Ibid. 52; cf. 51–52 and 110, n. 21: esp. in Tertullian, *De anima* 26, 4 and John Chrysostom, *Homily 24 on the Epistle to the Romans* (110, n. 24). The Greek text of Clement is quoted and translated by Franz Dölger, "Das Lebensrecht des ungeborenen Kindes und die Fruchtabtreibung in der Bewertung der heidnischen und christlichen Antike," *Antike und Christentum* 4 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1934) 1–61, at 28. Cf. Dölger's whole treatment of this Clement passage (28–32) and of Tertullian and Chrysostom (32–44, 60–61).

canonical emphases of Scripture. In this, as in some other recent uses of Scripture, the major thrusts of the Bible as a whole not only do not warrant the contemporary position on abortion but actually contradict it.

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