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Infanticide

Infanticide refers to intentional practices that cause the death of newborn infants or, secondarily, older children.

Scripture and the Christian tradition are unequivocal: infanticide is categorically condemned. Both Judaism and Christianity distinguished themselves in part via their opposition to widespread practices of infanticide in their cultural contexts. Are Christian communities today likewise distinguished, or, like many of their Israelite forebears, do they profess faith in God while worshipping Molech?

Infanticide in Scripture

Infanticide stands as an almost universal practice across history and culture (Williamson). Primary justifications often cite economic scarcity or population control needs, although occasionally infanticide flourished in prosperous cultural contexts (Levenson).

Infanticide or, more precisely, child sacrifice forms the background of much of the OT. Jon Levenson argues that the transformation of child sacrifice, captured in the repeated stories of the death and resurrection of the beloved and/or firstborn son, is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Israelites found themselves among peoples who practiced child sacrifice, particularly sacrifice of the firstborn son. In Deut. 12:31 it is said of the inhabitants of Canaan that “they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their

gods" (cf. 2 Kgs. 3:27). As early as Gen. 22, Abraham finds himself commanded to sacrifice Isaac. To Abraham's ears, God's command is perfectly logical, since the gods of the Canaanite peoples require this. But to sacrifice his only son, born to him in his old age, unlikely to be replaced, rendering God's promise impossible to fulfill? Here, at the very beginning of Scripture, God begins to transform the notion of deity, showing the character of the true and living God; Yahweh is a God of life, not death.

Alongside child sacrifice, the OT presents a second form of infanticide. Immediately after Genesis, Exodus opens with Pharaoh's attempt to limit the Israelite population by killing every male child (Exod. 1-2). The contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh ends only when Yahweh slays all firstborn creatures in Egypt not protected by the blood of the lamb (Exod. 11:4-12:39). At the end of this story, Yahweh commands the Israelites, "Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine" (Exod. 13:2). The firstborn remain Yahweh's, but they live. When Yahweh gives Israel the covenant, child sacrifice is named an abomination and specifically prohibited (Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10; cf. 2 Kgs. 17:31; 23:4, 10).

Yet child sacrifice continues. Many Israelites, particularly their kings, wanted it both ways, to worship Yahweh but also to worship the gods of the neighboring peoples. Ahaz "even burned his son as an offering" (2 Kgs. 16:3), as did Manasseh (2 Kgs. 21:6) and the people of Israel in conjunction with their worship of Baal and Molech (Lev. 18:21; 2 Kgs. 17:17; Jer. 7:30-31; 19:5; 32:35; Ezek. 16:20-21, 36). Infanticide, in other words, was deeply enmeshed with idolatry, particularly the worship of Molech, a chthonic deity, a god of the dead or of death. By practicing child sacrifice, the Israelites entered into a "covenant of death" (Muers).

The NT opens with echoes of Exodus. In a twisted parody of pharaonic self-aggrandizement, Herod orders all male children younger than two years of age in and around Bethlehem to be killed (Matt. 2:16-20). Again, at the center of the story is idolatry: the magi come to properly worship the newborn child; Herod, a Jew, not only refuses to worship God's anointed, the one who proves to be God's only and firstborn beloved son, but also, when his ruse of wanting to worship the child fails, seeks to kill him.

Infanticide in the Christian Tradition

The early church (in continuity with its Jewish identity) continued adamantly to oppose the

Greco-Roman practice of infanticide. The ancient Greeks and Romans rejected child sacrifice as barbarous, yet they widely practiced infanticide via strangulation or exposure of newborns, particularly of girls or children with deformities. Here infanticide was practiced primarily for economic reasons, at the whim of the paterfamilias. Christian witness against infanticide (and abortion) spans the patristic context (e.g., *Did.* 5.2; *Epistle of Barnabas* 19:5; also the authors Tertullian, Athenagoras, Minucius Felix, Justin Martyr, Lactantius, Ambrose). Infanticide became a capital offense after the Roman Empire's conversion to Christianity (Valentinian I [374 CE]), although offenders rarely were prosecuted.

Infanticide Today

Despite the constant teaching of Christianity, infanticide continued as a social practice in the Christian West (Milner). It remains an issue today, not only in China and India, where ultrasound technology has augmented traditional practices of female infanticide, or in contexts of impoverished countries. Direct killing of infants or children by parents is deemed almost the epitome of sociopathology, yet an increasing number of socially accepted practices entail or permit the death of children: embryo research, embryonic stem-cell research, preimplantation genetic diagnosis, abortion, withholding treatment from "defective" neonates, and euthanasia of disabled children.

Analysis of these issues exceeds the parameters of this article. Many would reject the analogy between these practices and infanticide, since most involve the killing of humans not yet born, those categorized as "nonpersons." Yet arguments favoring these practices mirror those made in the Roman context: economic burden, parental autonomy, reduction of suffering. Proponents would more vehemently reject parallels to child sacrifice. But in light of the rhetoric of fear that is often used to justify these practices, as well as the salvific and utopian claims made on their behalf, Christians and their communities must ask questions. How are these practices contemporary forms of idolatry? In what ways do these practices enmesh participants in a "covenant with death"? Might it be that we, who live in the most prosperous culture ever, profess faith with our lips while sacrificing our children on the altars of Molech?

See also Abortion; Bioethics; Children; Euthanasia; Idolatry; Population Policy and Control; Sanctity of Human Life

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