



# Biblical Ethics:

## Selected Resources from the ESV Study Bible

### The Beginning of Life and Abortion - The Image of God

The ethics of abortion, embryonic stem cell research, fetal tissue transplantation, and other issues at the beginning of life will not be fully and rightly understood apart from God's revelation about the origin and sanctity of human life. At the zenith of God's creative activity, he made man (as male and female) in his own image and likeness ([Gen. 1:26–27](#)). From the “dust from the ground” God made a “living creature,” Adam ([Gen. 2:7](#)), whose material body was absolutely earthly (cf. [Ps. 90:3 and 103:14](#)) but whose source of life was decidedly divine. Therefore, any view of origins that does not affirm that humanity began through a special creative act of God is sub-biblical.

Since God is the Creator of human life, all human beings belong to God. As the apostle Paul would later declare before the philosophers in Athens, “In [God] we live and move and have our being; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring’” ([Acts 17:28](#)). Thus, being created by God both *elevates* human beings in that they are not accidents of history and *humbles* them because God is gracious and sovereign over them.

Although God's words when he first created human beings were, “Let us make man in our *image*, after our *likeness*” ([Gen. 1:26](#)), the Bible nowhere explains precisely what constitutes the image of God (Latin, *imago Dei*). Interpreters have suggested that it includes: (1) humankind's upright bodily form, (2) human dominion over nature, (3) human reason, (4) human pre-fallen righteousness, (5) human capacities, (6) the juxtaposition between man and woman, (7) responsible creaturehood and moral conformity to God, (8) personhood, and (9) various composites of the above views. Because the Hebrew words for “image” (*tselem*) and “likeness” (*demut*) are used for things that are similar to, and representative of, something else, a combination of the above views is best: the image of God means that human beings are like God (in several ways) and represent God on the earth. The image of God is a rich relational and functional status that human beings enjoy by virtue of being God's creation.

It is clear from Scripture that *only* human beings are said to bear the image of God. Humans are unique. In fact, the covenant with Noah specifies that while humans may kill animals for food, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, *for God made man in his own image*” ([Gen. 9:6](#)). Animals may be killed for human sustenance, but human beings may not murder other human beings. Thus the entire human race is morally distinguishable from other living species. Even before homicide was forbidden by a direct command not to murder ([Ex. 20:13](#)), unjustifiable killing was a violation of the special dignity vested in human beings by God himself (cf. [Gen. 4:8–16](#)). This is the foundation of the doctrine of the sanctity, or sacredness, of every human life.

When the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, took on human flesh through the incarnation, God sanctified humanity. In Jesus we see both perfect God and real humanity, and in his incarnation and resurrection we see the importance of the physical aspect of human nature. The affirmation of the Apostles' Creed that Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary” entails that, like every other member of the human race, Jesus was once a human embryo. The creedal affirmations of “the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting” mean that the body is a constituent aspect of humanity from the beginning of life throughout eternity. Thus every human life—from conception to natural death—is to be received as a gift from the sovereign Creator, is to be treated with reverence and respect, and is not to be harmed without biblical justification.

## Old Testament Texts

God's people were warned not to imitate their neighbors who committed infanticide through child sacrifice. The law strictly instructed them to "not give any of your children to offer them to Molech" ([Lev. 18:21](#)), prescribing the death penalty for violating this command ([Lev. 20:2–5](#)). Child sacrifice was also known during Solomon's reign ([1 Kings 11:7](#)). The brutal practice spread to Moab ([2 Kings 3:27](#)), Judah ([2 Kings 16:3](#)), and the northern kingdom of Israel ([2 Kings 17:17](#)). But Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel condemned the practice, calling on God's people to repent of it ([Isa. 57:5](#); [Jer. 7:31](#); [Ezek. 16:20–21](#)).

It is in this context that the ethics of abortion should be determined. Like infanticide, abortion was not unknown in the ancient world. The most common means were mechanical methods and drugs delivered through pessaries (devices placed in the vagina).

OT Judaism always forbade abortion. Only one biblical text has been used to argue to the contrary ([Ex. 21:22–25](#)), and its interpretation is disputed. The text says, "When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined" ([Ex. 21:22](#)). Some interpret "that her children come out" as a miscarriage ("so that there is a miscarriage, but there is no further harm"). According to this interpretation, unborn human life does not have the same value as someone already born, because the normal penalty for causing death is a capital sentence (a life for a life), and yet, in this passage, the one causing the injury is merely fined.

There are good textual reasons, however, for another interpretation, namely, that the Bible is describing a premature live birth ("so that she gives birth prematurely, but there is no injury"). First, the Hebrew word *yeled* is used for what comes from the womb in this case. This word is never used for anything other than for a child who can live outside the womb. Another Hebrew word, *golem*, means "fetus" and is used only one time in the OT ([Ps. 139:16](#), "unformed substance"). Furthermore, *yatsa'*, the verb that refers to what happened to the child, ordinarily refers to live births ([Gen. 25:26](#); [38:28–30](#); [Job 3:11](#); [10:18](#); [Jer. 1:5](#); [20:18](#)). The word normally used for miscarriage, *shakal*, is *not* used here (cf. [Gen. 31:38](#); [Ex. 23:26](#); [Job 21:10](#); [Hos. 9:14](#)). Finally, even if the text were referring to a miscarriage, it would not indicate that an unborn child is valued less than one who is already born, for this hypothetical situation refers to an *accidental* occurrence. Most societies, including ancient Israel, recognized that unintentional manslaughter should be distinguished from premeditated killing. In the latter case, the death penalty was imposed. In the former, cities of refuge were established (cf. [Num. 35:6](#)). Thus, more literal translations render [Exodus 21:22](#), "When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that *her children come out*, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined" (ESV). This text then places great protection on the unborn child, for "if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life" ([Ex. 21:23](#)). The death of the baby is at least judged according to the same principles that apply to the taking of other human life (e.g., the death of the mother); see note on [Exodus 21:22–25](#).

[Psalm 139](#) speaks powerfully to the nature of unborn human life. David exults in God's omniscience and his omnipresence ([Ps. 139:1–12](#)). In [verse 13](#) he celebrates God's intricate involvement in his own fetal development: "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb." The word *kilyah* is used to refer to the "inward parts" (lit., kidneys). In Hebrew poetry the inward parts were typically the seat of the affections, the hidden part of a person where grief may be experienced ([Job 16:13](#)), where the conscience exists ([Ps. 16:7](#)), and where deep spiritual distress can be felt ([Ps. 73:21](#)). God formed David's deepest being. He wove him, or colorfully embroidered him, in his mother's womb, so that he was "fearfully and wonderfully made" ([Ps. 139:14](#)). In [verse 16](#) the psalmist refers to his "unformed substance" being observed by God. David suggests that God's knowledge of him reached even to his earliest development *in utero* (in the uterus). No wonder the Hebrews found abortion and infanticide morally blameworthy. In addition, David's confession that he was a sinner from conception ([Ps. 51:5](#)) further testifies to his belief in personhood from conception, since only persons can be considered sinners.

God's judgment fell on those who killed the unborn. Elisha wept when he foresaw the crimes of the king of Syria, who would "kill their young men with the sword and dash in pieces their little ones and rip open their pregnant women" ([2 Kings 8:12](#)). Amos prophesied against the Ammonites because they "have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border" ([Amos 1:13](#)).

## Extrabiblical Jewish Literature

The noncanonical Jewish wisdom literature further clarifies first-century Judaism's view of abortion. For example, the *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* 184–186 (c. 50 B.C.–A.D. 50) says that "a woman should not destroy the unborn in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before the dogs and vultures as a prey." Included among those who do evil in the apocalyptic *Sibylline Oracles* were women who "aborted what they carried in the womb" (2.281–282). Similarly, the apocryphal book *1 Enoch* (2nd or 1st century B.C.) declares that an evil angel taught humans how to "smash the embryo in the womb" (69.12). Finally, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that "*the law orders all the offspring to be brought up, and forbids women either to cause abortion or to make away with the fetus*" (*Against Apion* 2.202).

Contrast these injunctions with the barbarism of Roman culture. Cicero (106–43 B.C.) records that according to the Twelve Tables of Roman Law, "deformed infants shall be killed" (*De Legibus* 3.8). Plutarch (c. A.D. 46–120) spoke of those who he said "offered up their own children, and those who had no children would buy little ones from poor people and cut their throats as if they were so many lambs or young birds; meanwhile the mother stood by without a tear or moan" (*Moralia* 2.171D).

## Early Christian Literature

Against the bleak backdrop of Roman culture, the Hebrew "sanctity of human life" ethic provided the moral framework for early Christian condemnation of abortion and infanticide. For instance, the *Didache* 2.2 (c. A.D. 85–110) commands, "thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born." Another noncanonical early Christian text, the *Letter of Barnabas* 19.5 (c. A.D. 130), said: "You shall not abort a child nor, again, commit infanticide." There are numerous other examples of Christian condemnation of both infanticide and abortion. In fact, some biblical scholars have argued that the silence of the NT on abortion per se is due to the fact that it was simply assumed to be beyond the pale of early Christian practice. Nevertheless, Luke (a physician) points to fetal personhood when he observes that the unborn John the Baptist "leaped for joy" in his mother's womb when Elizabeth came into the presence of Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus at the time ([Luke 1:44](#)).

More than merely condemning abortion and infanticide, however, early Christians provided alternatives by rescuing and adopting children who were abandoned. For instance, Callistus (d. c. A.D. 223) provided refuge to abandoned children by placing them in Christian homes, and Benignus of Dijon (3rd century) offered nourishment and protection to abandoned children, including some with disabilities caused by unsuccessful abortions.

## Ethical Conclusions

Based on the consistent testimony of Scripture, the early Jewish and Christian tradition, and what can be known of God's moral law through natural revelation ([Rom. 2:15](#)), the unborn child should be protected as a person from the moment of conception. A strong argument can in fact be made for this even apart from biblical revelation, for the only differences between babies *in utero* and babies that are born are: (1) their location; (2) their size; (3) their level of dependence; and (4) their level of development—but these are not morally relevant factors that would allow death for one set of babies (the preborn) and life for the other (those who have been born).

What then of the “hard cases” concerning pregnancy resulting from rape or incest? Christians should give compassionate care to those affected by such sins—including both the mother and the unborn child. But if it is wrong to put such a child to death after it is born (and surely this is wrong), then surely it is wrong to put that same child to death before it is born. The preborn baby should be treated as a person in the image of God.

For this reason, embryonic stem cell research, which involves the creation of human embryos in order to harvest their stem cells for medical uses, should be viewed as the intentional creation and destruction of distinct, individual, tiny human lives. Other sources of stem cells should be used instead, where the removal of the cells does not harm a human being.

What if abortion is necessary to save the life of the mother? Here it is necessary to recognize that removing the unborn child (e.g., from the fallopian tube) is done with the direct intention of saving the life of the mother, not with the direct intention of taking the child’s life (which, if the medical technology exists, should also be preserved). Nevertheless, in such a rare and tragic case the choice would be between the loss of one life (the baby’s) and the loss of two lives (both the baby’s and the mother’s). This is the only type of situation in which abortion would be morally justified, as making the best of an extremely difficult situation.

The witness of Scripture, as confirmed by the testimony of the early church, is that every human being, from conception through natural death, is to be respected as a person created in the image of God, whose life has special dignity by virtue of his or her relationship to the Creator. Like the early church, Christians should be known as a people who protect, nurture, and cherish children as gifts from the Lord ([Ps. 127:3](#)).



**Source:** <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-study-bible/article-ethics/>

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