



## Position Paper #94

# The Bible and Abortion

## Introduction

The position of most anti-choice people is rooted in religious beliefs, and they often use quotes or idioms from the Bible to back them up. However, the Bible never condemns abortion and has several pro-choice passages. This paper will go through some passages that are distorted into anti-choice arguments, as well as pro-choice examples from the Bible.<sup>1,2</sup>

## Distorted Biblical Passages<sup>3</sup>

- The point at which human life begins is explained in Genesis 2:7: "...breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." So the Bible says life begins when breath is taken and ends when it stops. This section is often glossed over or ignored by anti-choice groups. Some religious arguments do mention this passage and suggest it refers to when the fetus begins to "breathe" amniotic fluid (around 9 weeks gestation). This argument lacks strength given a) it was not known in Biblical times how amniotic fluid functions in the womb and b) fetuses do not "breathe" fluid in the same way as breathing air.
- People are sometimes referred to as being "called by god" before birth. "The LORD called me from the womb. From the innermost parts of my mother, God named me ... and said to me, 'You are my servant Israel, in whom I'll be glorified'" (Isaiah 49:1-3). In this instance, the language is figurative and not literal, as it is referencing a nation (and not a person), so cannot be a basis for arguing life before birth.
- Other passages reference someone being "called by god" before they are even conceived (Genesis 18:9; 1 Samuel 1:17; Luke 1:31), but these also fall under figurative language. Anti-choice rhetoric does not claim that life begins *before* conception, or that women who menstruate or men who masturbate are also "murderers".
- Another example is Exodus 21:22-25: "When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is miscarriage, and yet no harm follows, the one who hurt her shall be fined according as the woman's husband shall lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine." Instead of receiving eye-for-an-eye treatment (i.e. capital punishment) for directly causing a miscarriage, the miscarriage is treated as loss of property, not loss of life. It is not treated as a live person who requires justice.

- Jeremiah 1:4-5. "Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you *and I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*'" (Emphasis added). Anti-choice arguments often willfully neglect to include the italicized part of this section, using the former section entirely out of content, preferring to ignore that it was intended to refer to one specific person and not every fetus.
- Psalms 139:13-16. "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed." This passage does not help the anti-choice position, as it states only that God is directly involved in the creation of a fetus and knows its future. The passage is poetic prose but anti-choicers have twisted it by giving it a literal, objective meaning where there is none.
- Luke 1:39-41. "In those days, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." This passage simply records a fetus kicking in the womb, and again it refers to another divine prophet ordained by God – John the Baptist. It does not venerate fetuses in general.

## Pro-Choice Passages

Several Biblical passages question the value of an unhappy, painful, or "wicked" life. They aver that it is better to suffer an "untimely birth" (i.e., be miscarried) than live a miserable existence, or worse, live as an evil unbeliever. The contention that quality of life is a more worthwhile pursuit than simply life for the sake of life is a basic pro-choice stance.

- Jeremiah 20:14-18. "Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, 'A son is born to you', making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities which the Lord overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb for ever great. Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?"
- Ecclesiastes 6:3-5. "If a man begets a hundred children, and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but he does not enjoy life's good things, and also has no burial, I say that an untimely birth is better off than he. For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; moreover it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he."
- Job 3:16-19. "Or why was I not as a hidden untimely birth, as infants that never see the light? There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest. There the prisoners

are at ease together; they hear not the voice of the taskmaster. The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master."

- Psalms 58:3-8. "The wicked go astray from the womb, they err from their birth, speaking lies. They have venom like the venom of a serpent. ... Let them vanish like water that runs away, like grass let them be trodden down and wither. Let them be like the snail which dissolves into slime, like the untimely birth that never sees the sun."

In Numbers 5, God actually mandates abortion when the fetus is a product of adultery. A jealous and suspicious husband should bring his wife to the local priest, who forces the woman to drink a poisonous "water of bitterness" to bring on God's "curse". If she experiences "bitter pain," if her "belly swells" and her "thigh rots," she fails the test and becomes an outcast. Virtually all Biblical scholars agree that this voodoo ritual and its cloaked euphemisms refer to an induced (not to mention unsafe) abortion. The word "thigh" in the Old Testament usually means genitals, but in this case, it refers to the uterus and its contents. One alternate Bible translation reads, "She will have barrenness and a miscarrying womb." (New International Version)

## Conclusion

These examples from the Bible show that the fundamental religious text anti-choice groups rely on for their arguments does not state that "life begins at conception", or even that abortion is wrong. As such, for those who are religious, it is important to realize that scripture is often misquoted and interpreted in a biased manner by those spouting anti-choice rhetoric. The Bible is not a set of specific instructions – it requires thought and reflection, and, as such, should be the subject of a rhetorical debate about abortion and "life" (resulting personal opinion), not an argument about how abortion should be approached on a policy level in a secular country.

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<sup>1</sup> Lowery, Rick. Abortion: *What the Bible Says (and Doesn't Say)*. Sept 14, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rick-lowery-phd/abortion-what-the-bible-says-and-doesnt-say\\_b\\_1856049.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rick-lowery-phd/abortion-what-the-bible-says-and-doesnt-say_b_1856049.html)

<sup>2</sup> Arthur, Joyce. Anti-Choicers Don't Have a Biblical Leg to Stand On. *Pro-Choice Press*. 2001. <http://www.prochoiceactionnetwork-canada.org/articles/bible.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.