

Early Christians on Abortion and Infanticide

The term "exposing infants" refers to the practice of abandoning infant children along roadsides, leaving them either to die of exposure or to be taken by someone, usually to be raised as a slave or a prostitute.

If men fight and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely... [and] if any lasting harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. Exod. 21.22.23.

You shall not kill the child by obtaining an abortion. Nor, again, shall you destroy him after he is born. Barnabas (c. 70-130, E) 1.148.

You shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill one who has been born. Didache (c.80-140, E), 1.377.

We say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder. And we also say they will have to give an account to God for the abortion. So on what basis could we commit murder? For it does not belong to the same person to regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being (and therefore an object of God's care)—yet, when he passed into life, to kill him. We also teach that it is wrong to expose an infant. For those who expose them are guilty of child murder. Athenagoras (c. 175, E) 2.147.

Although keeping parrots and curlews, the [pagans] do not adopt the orphan child. Rather, they expose children who are born at home. Yet, they take up young birds. So they prefer irrational creatures to rational ones! Clement of Alexandria (c. 195, E) 2.279.

What cause is there for the exposure of a child? The man who did not desire to beget children had no right to marry at all. He certainly does not have the right to become the murderer of his children, because of licentious indulgence. Clement of Alexandria (c. 195, E), 2.368.

In our case, murder is once for all forbidden. Therefore, we may not destroy even the fetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance. To hinder a birth is merely a speedier way to kill a human. It does not matter whether you take away a life that has been born, or destroy one that is not yet born. Tertullian (c. 197, W), 3.25.

First of all, you [pagan] expose your children, so that they may be taken by any compassionate passer-by, to whom they are quite unknown! Tertullian (c. 197, W) 3.26.

Among surgeons' tools there is a certain instrument that is formed with a nicely-adjusted flexible frame for first of all opening the uterus and then keeping it open. It also has a circular blade, by means of which the limbs within the womb are dissected with careful, but unflinching care. Its last appendage is a blunted or covered hook, by which the entire fetus is extracted by a violent delivery. There is also a copper needle or spike, by which the actual death is brought about in this treacherous robbery of life. From its infanticide function, they give it the name, "killer of the infant"—which infant, of course, had once been alive. Tertullian (c210, W), 3.206.

Indeed, the Law of Moses punishes with appropriate penalties the person who causes abortion. For there already exists the beginning stages of a human being. And even at this stage, [the fetus] is already acknowledged with having the condition of life and death, since he is already susceptible to both. Tertullian (c. 210, W), 3.218.

Are you to dissolve the conception by aid of drugs? I believe it is no more lawful to hurt a child in process of birth, than to hurt one who is already born. Tertullian (c. 212, W), 4.57.

I behold a certain ceremony and circumstance of adultery. On the one hand, idolatry precedes it and leads the way. On the other hand, murder follows in company. . . . Witness the midwives, too! How many adulterous conceptions are slaughtered! Tertullian (c. 212, W), 4.78.

There are some women who, by drinking medical preparations, extinguish the source of the future man in their very bowels. So they commit murder before they bring forth. And these things assuredly come down from the teaching of your gods. Mark Minucius Felix (c. 200, W), 4.192.

Women who were reputed believers began to resort to drugs for producing sterility. They also girded themselves around, so as to expel what was being conceived. For they did not wish to have a child by either a slave or by any common fellow—out of concern for their family and their excessive wealth. See what a great impiety the lawless one has advanced! He teaches adultery and murder at the same time! Hippolytus (c. 225, W), 5.131.

The womb of his wife was hit by a blow of his heel. And, in the miscarriage that soon followed, the offspring was brought forth, the fruit of a father's murder. Cyprian (c. 250, W), 5.326.

I cannot find language to even speak of the infants who were burned to the same Saturn! Lactantius (c. 304-313, W) 7.35.

[Speaking of pagans:] They either strangle the sons born from themselves, or if they are too "pious," they expose them. Lactantius (c. 304-313, W), 7.144, 145.

Let no one imagine that to strangle newborn children is allowable. For this is the greatest impiety! God breathes into their souls for life, not for death. Men... deprive souls that are still innocent and simple, of the light that they themselves have not given.... Or can those persons be considered innocent who expose their own offspring as prey for dogs? As far as their participation is concerned, they have killed them in a more cruel manner than if they had strangled them!... Therefore, if anyone is unable to bring up children because of poverty, it is better to abstain from marriage than to mar the work of God with wicked hands. Lactantius (c. 304-313, W), 7.187.

You shall not slay your child by causing abortion, nor kill the baby that is born. For "everything that is shaped and has received a soul is from God, if it is slain, shall be avenged, as being unjustly destroyed" [Ezek. 21:23, LXX]. Apostolic Constitutions (compiled c. 390, E), 7.466.

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