

Psalm 51 and the Beginning of Life

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Background

The world of modern medicine is teeming with ethical concerns regarding the beginning of life. Whether it is abortion, stem cell research, in vitro fertilization (IVF), or a related issue, Christians frequently hold the fate of a large number of embryos in their hands. While there have been many debates over scientific distinctions and theories, there has been considerably less focus on the simple testimony of the Holy Scriptures. Often laymen and clergy alike have struggled to interpret exactly what the Bible says when it comes to where life begins.



In my own studies, the crux of the idea of our beginning as individuals lies in Psalm 51:5 which reads, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.”ⁱ Not only does this verse demonstrate the doctrine of original sin – that every person has a corrupted nature passed on from their parents in conception – but also that a life, though sinful, begins at conception. Here it is obvious that “like all of us, David had been conceived and born with a corrupt nature inherited from Adam.”ⁱⁱ It must logically follow then that a core prerequisite for being sinful is having life itself. To deny that a person doesn’t exist at conception would likewise necessitate the denial of original sin itself. As a Lutheran, to do such would negate not only our Confessions but one of Martin Luther’s chief doctrines as well.

There are those in Christendom, however, who would go so far as to deny original sin. Such “interpreters think that David here has reference to the sexual act in the process of conception as not flowing from a pure heart...Now the act of conception may indeed involve some sinful impurity, and such sinfulness could perhaps have been predicated to David’s parents. However, David here is confessing his own sinfulness before God. He is concerned with his own sin, and traces it down to its evil root, to the time when his life first began.”ⁱⁱⁱ Neither is the denial of original sin historical. St. Augustine, the Doctor of Grace himself, writes that, “David hath taken upon him the person of mankind, and hath heeded the bonds of all men, hath considered the offspring of death, hath adverted to the origin of iniquity, and he saith, "For, behold, in iniquities I was conceived.”^{iv}

A Hole in Scholarship

Apparently such certainty as clearly articulated by all in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Quite naturally, I was rather amazed to find this verse completely absent from

both of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) reports regarding the subject – that is, *Christian Faith and Human Beginnings: Christian Care and Pre-implantation Human Life* (2005) and *Abortion in Perspective* (1984). Even though they claim to “return to fundamental questions concerning what it is to be a human”^v the only Psalm either quotes is Psalm 139.

Not only is a curious omission, but it reserves the discussion to a far weaker argument. Naturally, when limiting the discussion to the vague statement of Psalm 139:19, which simply states that God “formed my inward parts” and has “covered me in my mother’s womb,”^{vi} such truths of human beginnings “remain somewhat abstract,”^{vii} as pointed out by the CTCR. It is only Psalm 51 which lays a concrete claim to the beginning of life at the time of conception, a fact that only makes such an omission all the more confusing. In order to make a complete argument, all bases need to be covered, and a renewed investigation of Psalm 51 is an important step in that direction.

Examining the Text in the Original Languages

The best way to combat misunderstanding and misinterpretation is to return to the original languages of the Old Testament, namely the Hebrew text and the Septuagint (the Greek translation present at the time of Christ). Here – and only here – will the true nature of the verse be evident. English translations are useful tools, but they don’t always capture the true intent of the authors. While some may be hesitant to give credence to the Greek text, it is important to point out that not only was the Septuagint the primary text quoted by Jesus, but it was also received as canonical by the early church and likely used exclusively by churches in places such as Corinth and Philippi. Regardless of where a person stands in the Hebrew Text – Septuagint debate, however, most would agree that it is at the very least helpful to examine both sources in depth.

Psalm 51 in the Hebrew Text

To begin with the Hebrew, the verse is roughly transliterated from the original characters as “ubechete yechemachni imi”^{viii} and can be translated as “sinful in my mother’s hot passion.” The word often translated as “conceived” (“yechemachni” in Hebrew) actually refers directly to the sexual act of conception and arousal, as demonstrated by the rendering of “hot passion.” It could also be more colloquially translated as “sinful from the time my mother was hot.” Clearly to read the text as the Hebrew reader understood it and claim that the verse describes an event later than conception is unfounded and oblivious to the original language. If we truly believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God then we are left to conclude that the beginning of life, as the text indicates, must be traced back to the sexual act which created it. Attempts to shift the beginning of life beyond this are simply false distinctions.

Psalm 51 in the Septuagint

The Septuagint is equally as explicit. Psalm 51, in its Greek rendering, reads “Ἴδου γὰρ ἐν ἀνομίας συνέλημφθην, καὶ ἐν ἀμαρτίας **ἐκίσσησεν** με ἡ μήτηρ μου”^{ix} (emphasis added). The focus here is on the bolded word, “ἐκίσσησεν,” a form of the Greek word “κίσσω.” This word, like the Hebrew “yechemachni,” refers directly to the act of conceiving. In fact, in many ways it has a similar connotation of experiencing a “burning passion.” While it can be rendered literally as “conceive,” unlike its Hebrew counterpart, the word “κίσσω” has many different hues, as demonstrated by other Greek literature of the time.

The main source of reference in this regard is the Greek comedy writer and satirist, Aristophanes, who wrote many works in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, B.C. In his drama, *Wasps*, Aristophanes uses a form of “κίσσω” to say “**I burn** to run along the tiers of the tribunal with my voting-pebble in my hand”^x (emphasis added). The word can even refer to an intense longing. In the play *Peace*, also by Aristophanes, the word is used to pose the question, “Do you at least, **who long** for peace, pull heartily?”^{xi} Both burning and longing complement the idea of conception and put this verse in complete harmony with the Hebrew text. Clearly, as with the Hebrew, to interpret the text as a Greek reader would understand leaves no room for speculation. Similarly, to claim that the verse describes an event later than conception is to neglect the clear evidence of the text and related uses of the word “κίσσω.”

Ramifications

As orthodox, traditional Christians, we confess that the Holy Scriptures are not only inerrant, but also the only source and norm for doctrine and practice. In light of this, our ethical foundations must also be captive to the Word of God. If you believe that the Bible is God’s holy revelation, then there is no choice but to accept conception in the context of the sexual act as the beginning of life. As the Hebrew and Greek texts testify, we were individuals from the time we inherited original sin at conception.

Some attempt to argue that because science has revealed when organs such as the heart begin to function during pregnancy, this should be considered the beginning of life. Others have suggested that the emergence of the central nervous system is the mark of an individual. Such arguments, however, are irrelevant distinctions if Scripture is believed; “yechemachni” and “κίσσω” leave no room for speculation. The act of conceiving is the only accurate exegesis possible.

Unfortunately such a belief puts the Christian at odds with many in the medical and political arenas. If Christians remain steadfast in the Scriptures, however, they have no choice but to oppose the destruction of anything beyond conception. This includes all forms of abortion and IUDs which either destroy the embryo or prevent its implantation, effectively killing it. Such a belief also touches upon stem cell research, a process which cuts open and destroys an embryo in order to harvest the stem cells inside. When Psalm 51 is held as truth such is not the destruction of a clump of cells, as many researchers

would have us believe, but rather the murder of a unique individual for the sole purpose of harvesting research material. Even Dr. Bernard Lo, the Director of Medical Ethics at UC-San Francisco and a supporter of stem cell research, conceded at a recent MCW presentation that if a person believes in life at conception, such research would be “tantamount to murder.”^{xii}

We must hold to our convictions and the clear witness of Scripture. If we ignore Psalm 51, then not only do we run the risk of ignoring the destruction of human beings but also of denying the very basis of our faith – the Holy Word of God. It is my prayer that we continue to explore these pressing issues with a renewed focus on Scripture and the unchanging words of King David: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.”

ⁱ *The Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 507.

ⁱⁱ Brug, John F. *Peoples Bible Commentary: Psalms I* (St. Louis, MO: CPH, 1992), 212.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stoeckhardt, George. *Lectures on Select Psalms* (Lake Mills, IA: Graphic Publishing, 1965), 127.

^{iv} St. Augustine of Hippo. *Exposition on Psalm 51*. Available from <http://www.newadvent.com/fathers/1801051.htm>. Accessed 1 May 2006.

^v Commission on Theology and Church Relations (LCMS). *Christian Faith and Human Beginnings: Christian Care and Pre-implantation Human Life*, 2005. Available from <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/CTCR%20Human%20Beginnings.pdf>. Accessed 1 May, 2006.

^{vi} *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*, 555.

^{vii} Commission on Theology and Church Relations (LCMS). *Abortion in Perspective*, 1984. Available from http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Abortion_Perspective2.pdf. Accessed 1 May, 2006.

^{viii} *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977) 1133.

^{ix} *The Old Testament in Greek, Vol. II: I Chronicles- Tobit* (Cambridge: University Press, 1922), 280.

^x Aristophanes. *Wasps*. Available from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0044:line=348>. Accessed 1 May, 2006.

^{xi} Aristophanes. *Peace*. Available from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0038:line=486>. Accessed 1 May, 2006.

^{xii} Lo, Bernard. “Stem Cell Research: Science, Ethics, & Policy.” Henry Howe Chan Memorial Lecture, Medical College of Wisconsin. Presented 18 April, 2006.