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Infertility

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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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Infertility

Infertility refers to the biological inability to conceive and bear children. Stories of "barrenness" (the term used in some translations of the Bible) figure prominently in Scripture. This biblical witness challenges some contemporary assumptions about infertility and childbearing, especially when these stories are read theologically.

Barrenness in Scripture

The Bible contains stories of eight (initially) barren women: Sarah (Gen. 15–23), Rebekah (Gen. 24–25), Rachel (Gen. 29–35), Manoah's wife (Judg. 13), Hannah (1 Sam. 1–2), Michal (2 Sam. 6), a Shunammite woman (2 Kgs. 4), and Elizabeth (Luke 1). Then, as now, most of these women grieved their infertility. Shame and a sense of failure are compounded by their context: barrenness of land and womb was considered a sign of God's judgment, a curse for lack of righteousness or covenantal fidelity (Job 3:7; 15:34); fecundity was a sign of God's favor and blessing, a reward for righteousness (Exod. 23:36; Lev. 26:3–9; Deut. 7:12–14; Isa. 54:1). Moreover, Israel understood itself as being called to procreate, to fulfill God's original commandment, repeated in the context of the covenant to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars, to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28; 35:11). Failure to conceive had personal and corporate implications.

Almost all these women are righteous, even exemplary; thus, their barrenness confounds. Like contemporary women, some of these biblical women try to engineer offspring (via concubines, maidservants, and mandrakes), but the long-term outcomes of these efforts are generally problematic.

Eventually all but Michal give birth to sons: Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and Benjamin, Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist. Each of these stories is a key moment in salvation history. Adding the stories of Miriam, Mary, and others, one might say that, with rare exception, when God wants to do something in salvation history, someone gets pregnant. Someone gets pregnant when God wishes to establish the people of Israel, deliver Israel from the Philistines or Egyptians, transition Israel from judges to kings, herald the coming of the Messiah, or become incarnate. These stories attest that God works redemption through creation, through women (their bodies, agency, and work). Echoing the cross, these stories proclaim that God begins among the least and marginalized, confounding human wisdom by working redemption through something considered accursed.

Children in Christian Tradition

Elizabeth is the last barren woman mentioned in Scripture. With Jesus comes the fullness of redemption, and stories of miraculous birth disappear from the biblical narrative. Unlike the Jewish tradition, very early in its history Christianity adopts childlessness through vowed virginity as an ideal for both men and women. Apocalyptic notes in the Gospels caution women against bearing children because of the coming tribulation (Mark 13:17–19 pars.; Luke 23:28, 30–31) and appear even to bless the barren (Luke 23:29; cf. Wis. 3:13–14; Isa. 56:3–5; Jer. 16:1–4). Biological ties are relativized, as the church becomes one's new family. As Paul makes clear, for Christianity, redemption no longer comes through procreation but rather through adoption (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5) (see Wilson).

Although childlessness became a new ideal, marriage remained the norm for most Christians. Children became understood as the primary purpose for marriage, and reproduction an obligation of those in the married state. Consequently, throughout Christian

history barrenness has remained a stigma, a source of shame and grief.

Contemporary Application

These biblical stories of women righteous yet barren should dispel the misunderstanding of infertility as a punishment or curse. Should infertile Christians use reproductive technologies —fertility drugs, surrogacy, in-vitro fertilization? Although Scripture gives no commandment for or against such measures, the stories of barrenness do caution against trying to engineer children. The children who eventually come are, completely, gifts. Even then, many of the mothers (Sarah, Manoah's wife, Hannah, Elizabeth) return their children to God, for God's service. Christian reflection on reproductive technologies (and procreation) must consider this.

Such reflection must also take seriously the new paradigm of redemption: adoption. Since God now makes us his children via adoption, we may say that Christians are called to take adoption as a new paradigm for discipleship. Christian communities, above all, are called to live this new paradigm, to become exemplars of adoption. Even today, churches tend to exacerbate the pain of infertility by being excessively family- and child-oriented. Pastors should consider carefully how preaching and practices that privilege biological procreation impact infertile women and couples, and they should begin to restructure their congregations into places that embody the example of the God who adopts us all into the kingdom.

See also Adoption; Childlessness; Children; Procreation; Reproductive Technologies

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Information Technology

Information technology comprises the various devices and systems for storing and manipulating digital data: computers, the internet, the world wide web, digital audio and video recording, and so on. As such, it involves technologies of storage and communication that are not unprecedented (from clay tablets to papyrus letters to books) but do have capacities and intensities that set them apart from their antecedents.

The prevalence of information technology in many contemporary cultures (and its increasing prominence around the globe) engages ethical questions in a variety of dimensions. Information technology raises familiar ethical topics in an unfamiliar context, new ethical questions intrinsic to the capacities of digital culture, and ethical questions