

**Q. Does the Old Testament support the idea that a human embryo or fetus is not a living person?**

A. Pro-abortionists sometimes cite a passage in Exodus to support their case. It is not about women having voluntary abortions but instead speaks of the possibility of two men fighting who accidentally hit a pregnant woman. The pro-abortionists, with the support of some Bible translations, say that, even though the woman miscarries—aborts a stillborn—the husband need only impose a fine on the man who hit his wife. If the woman is injured or killed, however, then the eye for eye and tooth for tooth principle must be imposed. Their interpretation, then, implies that unborn babies were considered mere property and not living people. But is this interpretation what the Bible teaches, or has it been concocted to make the Bible seem to support abortion?

### **Miscarriage or Mistranslation?**

The verses in question are Exodus 21:22-25. Let's look at them in *Young's Literal Translation* of the Hebrew:

And when men strive, and have smitten a pregnant woman, and her children have come out, and there is no mischief, he is certainly fined, as the husband of the woman doth lay upon him, and he hath given through the judges; and if there is mischief, then thou hast given life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Now, compare this literal translation with verse 22 of the *New Revised Standard Version*: "When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine." The English word

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"miscarriage" has been substituted for the words "children [yeladeyha] have come out [weyatse'u—never means to miscarry or abort]." While, as I have just shown, "children have come out" has corresponding Hebrew words, there is no corresponding word in this verse for "miscarriage." The Hebrew word for "miscarriage" is *shakal*. It is not found in this verse. Several other modern translations use "miscarriage" here. They are all interpretations that, apparently because of a preconceived idea, use an English word that doesn't belong in the verse.

If "miscarriage" were correct, then Exodus 21:22 would be saying if a miscarriage occurs but no further (the word "further" is also not in the Hebrew) harm occurs (to the woman), then a mere fine is imposed. If this were the case, it would mean that the Old Testament treated the loss of the fetus not as the loss of a human life, but only as the loss of some property. If this were true, it would imply that God does not see the unborn child as a living human being. Abortion, then, would not be morally wrong. But "miscarriage" is not in this verse. "Miscarriage" is a mistranslation.

### **No Harm to the Children**

We've seen *Young's Literal Translation*. Now let's look at some modern translations that are slightly less literal but still convey the meaning of the Hebrew. "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...." (*English Standard Version*). "If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined...." (*New American Standard Bible*). "When men get in a fight and hit a pregnant woman so that her children are born prematurely but there is no injury, the one who hit her must be fined...." (*Holman Christian Standard Bible*).

Clearly, what this is saying is that if two men are fighting and a pregnant woman gets hit and this results in her giving birth, if neither the child (or children) nor the woman are harmed, the man who hit her is to be fined for hitting the woman and/or for the inconvenience of the early birth. If the woman and/or the child (or children) are harmed or killed, however, then the law of retaliation (called in Latin, *lex talionis*) applies: "But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (verses 23-25, *English Standard Version*).

What a difference a proper translation makes! Rather than being evidence that abortion is morally acceptable because the "miscarriage" is merely treated as property, this passage is strong evidence against abortion because harm or death to the embryo or fetus under Old Testament law was punished in precisely the same way as harm or death to an adult. This shows that God considers the baby, at whatever stage of development, to be a living person.

Of course, we are not under Old Testament law, but that fact does not change the fact that unborn babies are alive. Yet, Christians are not responsible to judge or condemn those who have had or conduct abortions. God holds civil rulers responsible for protecting innocent lives and punishing evil doers (Romans 13:3-4).

Knowing that the lives of babies is at stake and that governments are doing very little to protect them can drive us to lay guilt on those responsible. But if the innocent Son of God could say from the Cross, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing," (Luke 23:34), so can we. Our response, even to something this awful, must always be love. Abortion is wrong, and we should be able to explain why. But if we follow that with condemnation, we will only drive people into a corner that they will try to defend. As Proverbs 10:12 says, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all wrongs" (Proverbs 10:12). Instead, we must be beacons of God's love that will cause people to glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

*Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is the good, well-pleasing, and perfect will of God.*

Romans 12:2

**Peter Ditzel**