

## THE CORPOREAL REALITY OF *NEPEŠ* AND THE STATUS OF THE UNBORN

John C. Rankin\*

In this paper I would like to make a straightforward presentation that I find exegetically and hermeneutically clear: Human life is a gift from God, and its origin in biological terms reflects the order of creation. Specifically, at the point of conception the one-celled human zygote is a person in the fullest theological sense, an image-bearer of God deserving the same respect and protection that we as Christians afford all human beings.

This conviction defines the issue of abortion for Christians who accept the historical trustworthiness of Scripture. For evangelicals, *sola Scriptura* is decisive. And for those of a more liberal theological persuasion, with varying degrees of emphasis on the quadrilateral appeal to Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, I believe my argument is still definitive.

There is an inherent difficulty in addressing the question of abortion from Biblical sources since in fact the Bible does not address the subject explicitly.<sup>1</sup> The answer, however, is not to construct an argument from supposed silence that abortion is permissible. Any hermeneutic that argues from silence is fraught with danger over a wide array of issues, especially when it affects the making of public policy. Rather, the task is to go to the roots of Scripture and address the deeper and more foundational concerns that reveal a hermeneutic that is honestly applicable to questions of abortion. Another difficulty encountered is the issue of personhood. How does Scripture address or define a concept of personhood that is relevant to the modern judicial and political quandaries surrounding it?

The answer is in understanding the Hebrew term *nepeš* as definitively introduced in Gen 2:7: "And Yahweh God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living *nepeš*."

The term *nepeš* has often been translated or understood as "soul." The same is true for the parallel NT term, *psychē*. Though "soul" can be a useful term, there are serious problems with its use as a translation for *nepeš* due to its primary use in English as denoting a metaphysical sense of existence

\*John Rankin is a master's degree candidate in ethics at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>1</sup>M. G. Kline, "Lex Talionis and the Human Fetus," *JETS* 20/3 (1977) 193: "The most significant thing about abortion legislation in Biblical law is that there is none. It was so unthinkable that an Israelite woman should desire an abortion that there was no need to mention this offense in the criminal code." Kline's article exegetes Exod 21:22-25 and interprets its concern for the life of the accidentally expelled fetus as radically "pro-life." And apart from the NT use of *pharmakeia*, which may include the sense of abortifacient as used later in Church history, the Bible does not touch on abortion directly.

separate or separable from the body.<sup>2</sup> This sense of soul introduces a gnostic dualism where the body and material world are seen as evil, and this is wholly incongruent with *nepesh*. In the early centuries of the Church, gnosticism challenged the integrity of the incarnation, of God truly taking on human flesh. Thus gnosticism was repudiated by the great Church councils as contrary to Scripture. Today any similar understanding of *nepesh* as metaphysical soul challenges the validity of corporeal, biological life as pertinent in defining personhood, in defining the locus of the *imago Dei*.

In view of this, it is necessary to exegete *nepesh*. Such exegesis has been fully and happily done in two principal sources—in one by Edmund Jacob and in the other by Hans Walter Wolff. First, Jacob:

*Nepesh* is the usual term for a man's total nature, for what he is and not just what he has. This gives the term priority in the anthropological vocabulary. . . . The classical text in Gn. 2:7 clearly expresses this when it calls man in his totality a *nepesh hayyah*. . . . The *nepesh* is almost always connected with a form. It has no existence apart from the body. Hence the best translation in many instances is "person" comprised in corporeal reality.<sup>3</sup>

Jacob's observations give us five salient points worth considering.

1. *Adam was created as a whole, mature, male adult.* The same is true for Eve as a female adult. A playful way to examine this point is to ask whether Adam had a belly button (while the cosmos shivers in nervous anticipation of finding the answer—at least in the view of some of the scholastics). The question revolves around the perception that he could not have had a belly button because he did not come through a mother's womb. That seems simple enough on the face of it, but Adam likewise did not go through the processes of learning to crawl, walk, talk, or sing, nor did he experience going through puberty. And yet as a man, just created by God, he possessed the faculties or fruit of one who had had such an infancy and childhood, including the nurture of a mother's womb. Thus it would be consistent to view Adam with a belly button, just as in his created maturity his whole person reflected the

<sup>2</sup>The *Random House Dictionary of the English Language: The Unabridged Edition* (New York: Random House, 1966) 1359. Of the ten definitions given, none mention corporeality, though the fifth one speaks of a human being or person, which could obliquely refer to corporeality. But the first definition speaks of "a distinct entity separate from the body, and commonly held to be separable in existence from the body; the spiritual part of man as distinct from the physical part." And the third definition speaks of a "disembodied spirit." With the etymology of the English word "soul" tracing back to the sea and its fancied habitation, we see how inappropriate it is for translation of the corporeal *nepesh*. But it is a word with such romantic power in the English language that I suspect others as well as myself face the temptation to redeem its use by adding a sense of corporeality to it.

<sup>3</sup>E. Jacob, "psychē," *TDNT* 9 (1974) 620. The use of "man" here does not refer to male over and against female but represents Hebrew *ʾādām*, which means "human being" inclusive of both male and female. It is interesting that the name Adam thus carries within it this reality. The first male was given a name that meant "human." And the OT throughout is based on this assumption. Just as the *imago Dei* is given to male and female alike (Gen 1:26-28), the OT creation stands not only in stark historical contrast to the various creation myths (Babylonian, Greek, Egyptian, Mayan, etc.) but is also unique in its affirmation of women as full partakers in the divine nature. The Biblical *ʾādām* (OT) and *anthrōpos* (NT) are inclusive of women when describing humanity.

culmination of various stages that all adults have been through. So the question of the belly button, while not crucial to orthodoxy, nevertheless directs us to the important distinction between Adam and Eve as God's first and direct creation on the one hand and ourselves as having been procreated on the other.

Adam is not the result of an evolutionary process. He did not mature to his full stature through stages of unnurtured vulnerability, which is logically what a consistent Darwinian biology proposes for the origins of life.<sup>4</sup> Instead, as the fossil records demonstrate the mature and "sudden" arrival of species able to procreate, so too did God create human life. The egg did not precede the chicken, but God created the rooster and chicken first, and thereafter the chicken sat on the egg in nurturance.

Feminist theology has an excellent vantage point from which to celebrate the motherhood or feminine qualities of God, so long as the pendulum does not swing into non-Biblical language. Yahweh, in creating Adam and Eve as mature adults, nurtured them in his eternal presence. And such creative nurture is exactly what the woman's womb reflects in the *imago Dei*. Adam and Eve came from God's womb.<sup>5</sup>

2. *It is God's "breath" that is referred to, not Adam's.* Very simply this indicates that Yahweh imparted his image at this point, making specific the claim of Gen 1:26-28 that we are created in the image of God.<sup>6</sup> Adam is both a creature of the sixth day (made from the dust or the same molecular material as the whole universe) and a creature of the seventh day (imbued with God's Spirit and destined to enter the eternal Sabbath). Once Adam and Eve received Yahweh's creative breath they were set to procreate the very same to their children.<sup>7</sup> Thus Adam is unique as he receives his totality directly from God, whereas Adam and Eve's progeny receive God's breath through them.

This is important because of a not-so-uncommon misunderstanding that it was Adam's breath that is being referred to here. Such an erroneous view paves the way for the contention that *nepeš* (and thus the *imago Dei* status) does not begin until a child's head emerges from the birth canal and he or she

<sup>4</sup>J. C. Rankin, "Charles Darwin and His Hidden Agenda" (unpublished, 1983, 1985). In this paper I trace Darwin's philosophical assumptions that were pitted against the possibility of teleology, demonstrating that his macro-evolutionary assumptions went against evidence he knew about. But as T. Kuhn points out in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* such hidden agendas are not uncommon.

<sup>5</sup>In Isa 49:15 Yahweh makes explicit identification with a mother's womb, and in Luke 13:34 Jesus makes analogy to himself as a mother hen. Ps 44:25 (44:26 Hebrew) places *nepeš* as poetically parallel to *beten*, a word translatable as "female belly" or "womb."

<sup>6</sup>Cf. M. G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, vol. 1 (privately published, 1981); *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980). It also seems clear to me from the text itself that Gen 1:1-2:3 is the grand view of Elohim and that 2:4-25 (with the key transition of v 4) is Yahweh's specific creation of Adam and Eve and his specific instructions to them. Thus 2:7 is the imparting of the *imago Dei* with the specificity that was generally defined in 1:26-28.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Gen 5:1-3.

actually breathes in oxygen.<sup>8</sup> However bizarre this position may seem, it has been seriously held in Jewish midrash and elsewhere. Such sources accordingly teach that theologically important human life does not begin until birth. And this view has been subsequently applied to legitimize abortion as something less than the taking of human life.

3. *Human life as given by God is a matter of essence, not of achievement.* As Jacob points out, *nepeš* is a matter of what we are, not what we possess. We do not possess soul or personhood; we are souls, we are persons. Such a use of "soul" is narrowly defined in terms of corporeal personhood, not metaphysical entity. Since we are what God has given us to be, and since we have not achieved mature life by a self-initiated evolutionary process, we are by definition dependent on God and his created order, which undergirds the procreative process from start to finish as good. Its goodness, along with the *imago Dei*, is maintained in the wake of sin's intrusion into human life. There was no possibility in the order of creation for death, divorce or abortion. Only wholeness and completed destiny were supposed in God's gift. This is the nature of the Sabbath, of God's character, and it is our nature in reflecting his character. The redemptive process aims at a full completion of the creation's original goal of the eternal Sabbath. When life is a matter of essence, and as we continue to demonstrate its *imago Dei* status from conception, then we see that the dependency of the human zygote or embryo marks our human nature, whether we are dependent on our mother's womb before birth or on this planet's ecosphere after birth.

Thus the gestational age or stage of development of the unborn child means nothing in terms of his or her humanity. It only means that we all grow, from conception to mature adulthood. All of us who read this were once one-celled zygotes. That is a foundational reality of our present identities from which we can never existentially escape. A doctrine of essence celebrates and protects all human life, whereas a doctrine of achievement serves a positivistic macro-evolutionary scheme that permits arbitrary definitions that can exclude the unborn, blacks, Jews, gypsies, the handicapped, mentally ill, infirm aged, or whoever those in political power decide do not meet their standards for human personhood.

4. *Since nepeš does not exist apart from corporeal reality we do not possess our bodies; rather, our bodies are integral parts of our whole identities.* We are heart, soul, mind and strength, as Moses and Jesus point out, not just one aspect or another. Adam and Eve were created in bodies that were meant to live forever, and Jesus died and rose in order to restore us to eternal bodies. We look forward to resurrection bodies, not to ethereal bodies floating in space. Jesus returned to the five hundred witnesses in his resurrection body, the same Jesus whose identity as the Son of God was announced at the time

<sup>8</sup>Cf. G. Grisez, *Abortion: The Myths, the Realities, and the Arguments* (New York: Corpus, 1970) 127-128. It is also interesting to note how faulty an argument based on breathing oxygen can be, for the fetus begins breathing in amniotic fluid by the twelfth or fourteenth week *in utero*.

of his conception. How anyone can believe in the incarnation and deny the humanity of the unborn is difficult for me to understand. The body is a good gift from God, and he will redeem it as a part of our whole persons. Enough with gnostic disdain for the body, and enough with an atomistic biology that would reduce us to animals of the sixth day!

5. Accordingly, *nepeš* in its primary sense is best translated as "person" in corporeal reality. Adam, when instilled with God's breath, became a living person. His personhood existed only in conjunction with his body. Thus biological concerns do in fact apply to questions of personhood.

Well and good—but how does this apply to the unborn in more specific fashion than logical inference? Besides the ground we have already covered that points us in such a direction there are two remaining perspectives, which taken together fill in the argument. First is a definition of biological life, and second is Wolff's further definition of *nepeš*.

A definition of conception is in order. This definition, while in my own words, is well attested by science across the board. The spermatozoon (sperm) and the ovum (egg) are both haploid cells. This means they are incapable of cell division or reproduction in and of themselves. Cell division is necessary to qualify as biological life as well as fully sufficient to define it. The sperm and the egg each have potential biological life, which becomes actual at the point of conception (specifically here referring to fertilization). Apart from conception these haploid cells have no other possibility but to die. In and of itself a haploid cell can never become a human being. It has no future.

At the moment of conception the sperm fertilizes the egg, and a dramatic and instantaneous change occurs. These two complementary haploid cells form a diploid cell, which is otherwise known biologically as a whole body. This diploid life has a genetic uniqueness, completeness and wholeness as a one-celled zygote. Such a zygote formed at conception has all the genetic identity and programming to mature into an embryo, a fetus, a baby, a child, a teenager, an adult. The one-celled zygote is fully human life (not just potential as though it has the potential to be other than human), the offspring of two human parents. Human beings can procreate nothing else but human life.

As I said earlier, we were all once one-celled zygotes. We never were just a sperm or an egg. Rather, we came from a specific sperm and a specific egg when they united at conception. Therefore our individuality in genetic terms begins at the moment of conception.<sup>9</sup>

The wholeness and destiny factors of conception reflect the theological reality of creation, which should be no surprise in that God made us as

<sup>9</sup>The only argument (genetically speaking) against identifying individuality with the moment of conception concerns the question of twinning. Cf. A. S. Moraczewski, "Human Personhood: A Study in Person-alized Biology," in *Abortion and the Status of the Fetus* (ed. W. B. Bondeson, H. T. Engelhardt et al.; Boston: D. Reidel, 1983) 306-307. It is a moot issue, however. Although twinning may not occur until ten to fourteen days after conception, the specific individualities are genetically provided for at conception. No individualities exist before conception, and at conception there may be potential for twins (or triplets, etc.) or there may not. If so, both twins root their origins at conception nonetheless.

corporeal beings. Before conception there is no identity, before God's breath there is no identity.<sup>10</sup> Since *nepes̄* celebrates the corporeality of personhood, and since it is indisputable that our individual corporeality begins at the moment of conception, the inference of *nepes̄* as applying to the one-celled zygote is clear. It is an unambiguously positive assumption on the part of Scripture that all human life, from its discernible origins, is given by God, cared for by him as such reflects his image. It is only sin that tears apart, that interferes passively or actively in moral terms, with the integrity of nascent life. And redemption is the process that restores wholeness to broken lives. Are we agents of sin or agents of redemption?<sup>11</sup> The burden of proof rests with those who would deny the unborn any measure of God's image for them to explicitly support such a view Biblically. It cannot be done. But to clinch our argument it is helpful to further align the nature of the one-celled zygote with the nature of *nepes̄*.

Thus we turn to Wolff, our second exegetical source, who states that *nepes̄*

stands for needy man *per se*. . . *Nepesh* therefore does not say what a man has, but who the person is who receives life (*hayyim*): "person," "individual," "being." . . . If we survey the wide context in which the *nepesh* of man and man as *nepesh* can be observed, we see above all man marked out as the individual being who has neither acquired, nor can preserve, life by himself, but who is eager for life, spurred on by vital desire, as the throat (the organ for receiving nourishment and for breathing) and the neck (as the part of the body which is especially at risk) make clear. Although in this way *nepesh* shows man primarily in his need and desire, that includes his emotional excitability and vulnerability.<sup>12</sup>

Wolff's chapter on *nepes̄* focuses on the etymology of the term as rooted in the throat and neck. In seeking to arrive at a central understanding of the term, which includes corporeal personhood, and how "soul" may or may not be a useful translation, he concludes that *nepes̄* denotes a state of needfulness above all. Adam's breath and ability to continue breathing and living is dependent on God's original breath and the ecosphere of creation that sustains him accordingly. The vulnerability of the neck and throat define human life. It marks our nature as always dependent and needful.

It is this definition of needfulness that highlights the continuity of human nature, of the *imago Dei*, before and after the intrusion of sin. In the order of creation, humankind was needful of Yahweh's role as Creator and Sustainer. After sin we need not only that but also his role as Redeemer. Thus the incarnation, atoning death, resurrection, gift of the Spirit and second coming

<sup>10</sup>That is, in the sense of corporeality. As Ps 139:16; Jer 1:5 indicate in view of Rom 8:28-30, God's foreknowledge provides for our identities being in his "mind" from eternity. But that is a theological point of concern that is beyond our scope or purpose in this paper.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. J. C. Rankin, "Abortion and the Destruction of Creativity" (unpublished, 1986). In this paper I conclude with "Abortion and Redemption: A Statement" (which defines abortion as the opposite of redemption) after having applied the hermeneutics of creation, sin and redemption as the context for addressing the question of human abortion.

<sup>12</sup>H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 21, 24-25.

are all necessary for our needs to be met. Much of what Wolff says further reflects what we have already seen in Jacob. His unique contribution as clincher here is the definition of explicit need as characterizing *nepeš*.

Thus *nepeš* may be defined as "needful corporeal personhood," a theologically full-blooded definition that crosses the centuries and cultures and needs to be understood behind our translation choices for the word, which given the context may be "person," "being," "soul," "individual" or rendered as a reflexive pronoun. But whatever translation a given context may merit, this fulness lies consistently at the root.

Such needful corporeal personhood directly addresses the status of the unborn. Who in the human race is more needful of nurture and protection? Who in the human community was not once such a vulnerable one-celled zygote, blastocyst, embryo and fetus? Where in Scripture is there anything less than the full linkage between origin and destiny affirmed? What one-celled zygote is not fully corporeal? We are persons from the moment of our conceptions—that is clear. Abortion is defined as "to stop from rising" or "to cut off from birth."<sup>13</sup> Such is the opposite of the wholeness, totality, and sabbatical teleology of the order of creation. Abortion is the opposite of what redemption aims to restore. Abortion is death.

It is little wonder that Scripture did not have occasion to address abortion directly. The affirmation of unborn human life is written into the fabric of the hermeneutics of creation, sin and redemption. Its assumption was so powerful that the Hebrew writers of the canon could not imagine abortion. Thus David is nothing but positive when he touches the status of the unborn in poetic hymn (Ps 139:13-16):

For you created my inmost being;  
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
 your works are wonderful,  
 I<sup>14</sup> know that full well.  
 My frame was not hidden from you  
 when I was made in the secret place.  
 When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,  
 your eyes saw my unformed body.  
 All the days ordained for me  
 were written in your book  
 before one of them came to be.

Psalms 139 is not only structured with poetic parallelisms and edifying hyperbole; it is also chiasmic in structuring the theme. It begins and ends with the concern that "Yahweh knows me." This knowledge of us equals Yahweh's presence in all aspects of our lives. The apex of the chiasm is the verses quoted above, where David rhetorically exercises God's presence by asking where he could possibly flee to escape it. He considers the heavens and the depths of Sheol, the wings of the dawn and the far side of the sea, and the

<sup>13</sup>Latin *ab- + oriri*.

<sup>14</sup>Hebrew = "my *nepeš*." *NIV* uses the reflexive pronoun here, whereas *KJV* translates it as "my soul."

cloak of darkness. And yet God is present. Finally David considers what for him must have been the most remote of locales: his mother's womb. And when he does he celebrates God's presence, and his language reflects the needfulness, corporeality and personhood of *nepeš*. God is present with David in the womb and before. David has his full identity in the womb, and his identity is linked with his "frame" and "unformed body."<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting to note that in public debate about abortion, advocates of legalized abortion consistently dehumanize the nascent unborn because of their lack of articulate achievement. The celebration of God's presence here in Psalm 139 cuts directly against the grain of such an achievement ethic, defining life by the presence of God. Whereas the carnal mind finds difficulty in the sentience of identifying with a one-celled zygote or embryo, God does not—especially since, in the incarnation, he was fully such a one-celled zygote once. Only when we realize the needfulness of our human nature can we by God's Spirit compassionately identify with the humanity of the newly conceived human being. Perhaps David too, in considering poetically the womb as a remote place, had in mind the inherent human difficulty of existentially identifying with an embryo. But this is precisely where his theology, his faith in the God of creation, triumphed.

Isa 42:3 speaks of the Messiah accordingly: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." The whole redemptive agenda of the Messiah is to affirm whatever flickering presence of the *imago Dei* he can find—always to add, never to take away. Apart from the rare instances such as a cancerous uterus,<sup>16</sup> where a continued pregnancy will kill both mother and child, abortion is the opposite of the affirmation of *nepeš* both in creation and redemption. It is an active manifestation of sin's brokenness adding more brokenness. We should therefore base our hermeneutics of abortion and public policy accordingly, the enormous content of which I address elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Hebrew society had plenty of experience with miscarriages at all stages, as did all societies. David, in thus being familiar, here distinguishes between what we technically call an embryo, or up to six weeks *in utero* before rudimentary anatomy is visible, and a fetus, from six weeks to birth, when the physical frame is "formed" and forming. David's description of the "unformed body" thus includes the earliest stages of gestation, and such a phrase coupled with God's presence and full human identity once again reinforces the ethic of essence over and against achievement.

<sup>16</sup>With neonatal intensive care and high-tech medical techniques it has become rare for a mother's life to be endangered by pregnancy. Most dangers over the centuries have been in the latter months of pregnancy. Now those situations are taken care of by C-section and early delivery where the child has a high rate of probability to live. On the other end of the spectrum, ectopic pregnancies (Greek *ek + topos* = "out of place") need surgical removal because otherwise the mother will die. Though such can be viewed as an abortion it usually is not, for since the embryo is not safely in the uterus (i.e. in a blocked fallopian tube) he/she is a biologically whole human being but faced with no possibility of living beyond a certain nascent stage (until such time as the surgical techniques are developed to rescue and reimplant such an embryo in the uterus). Surgical removal of an embryo does not "stop from rising," for the rising to maturity is already stopped by extenuating conditions. A miraculous story of God's intervention in a hydatidiform mole pregnancy with attenuating virulent malignancy is found in James Dobson's newsletter *Focus on the Family* (April 4, 1986).

<sup>17</sup>J. C. Rankin, "Towards the Abolition of Abortion" (unpublished, 1987).