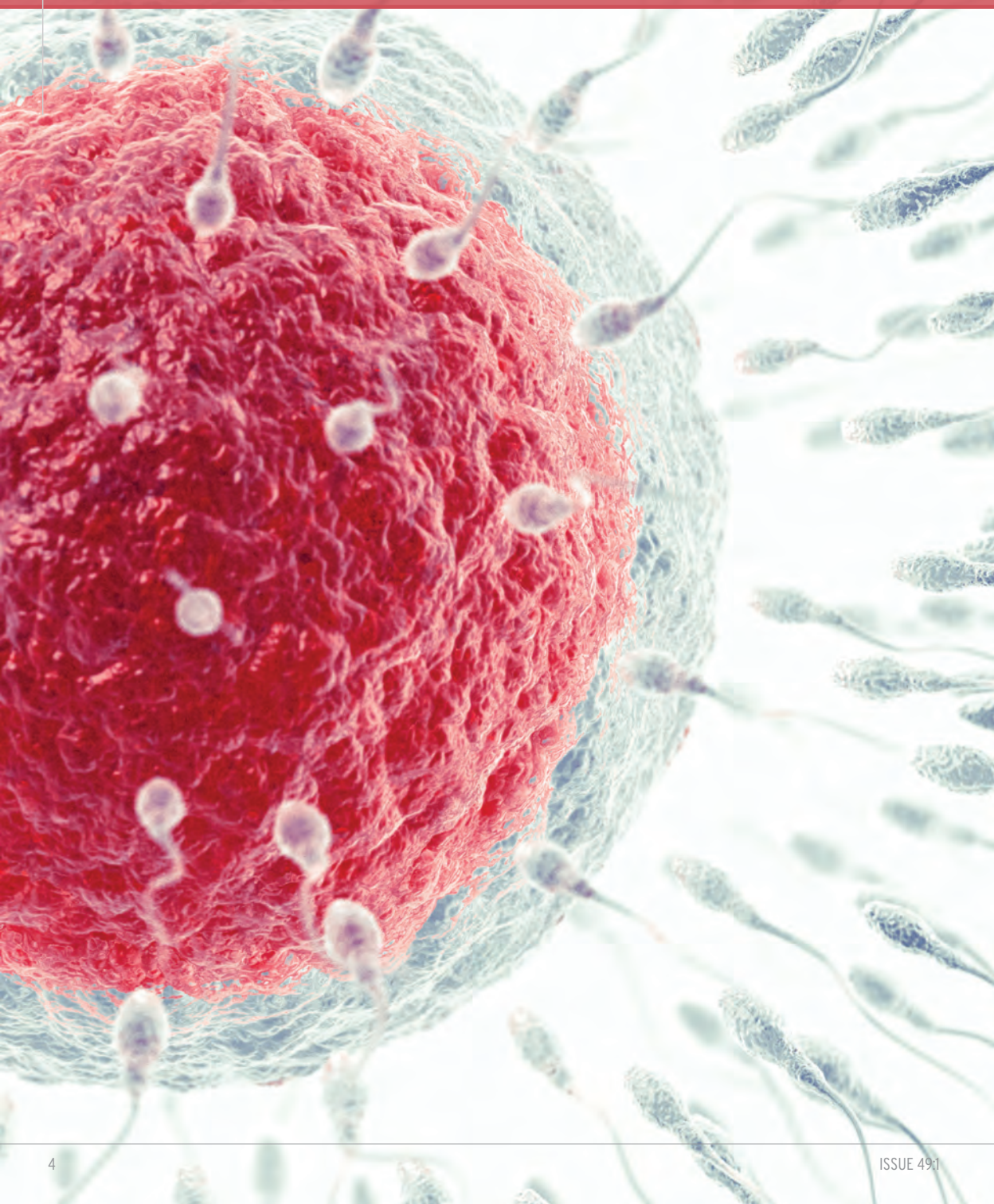


when does life begin?

Laurence Crutchlow explores the Bible's teaching on early life





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When does life begin? This simple question has grown harder to answer as we have better understood the exact process of conception, uterine implantation, and pregnancy. There has not always been consensus within CMF over the answer, particularly over whether conception or implantation signals the start of life. The morally relevant distinction has implications for how we might view embryo research, some fertility treatments, and certain contraceptives. Such applications have been explored in recent CMF booklets,¹ and I consider them in a student context in the *Distinctives* article on page 26. The present will give an overview of some of the biblical passages often cited in such discussion, consider a little of how we interpret them, and draw some conclusions.

society's view

God created us in his image.² Taking human life carries severe penalties.³ But what constitutes a human life worthy of protection? A young baby girl, healthy, born at term, is still entirely dependent on her parents for every need. Few in the UK would doubt that her life is worthy of protection; ethicists such as Peter Singer may disagree,⁴ but widespread female infanticide⁵ reminds us that not everyone values the life of a newborn baby. The same girl born at 28 weeks gestation is very likely to survive, and a great deal of effort will be put into her care. Yet a century ago the picture would have been very different, with low chances of survival meaning that she would have been quietly allowed to die.

Now, questions are more likely to arise with a baby born at 23 weeks gestation, where chances of survival are smaller, but not insignificant.⁶ Yet under current abortion law in the UK, the very same 23 week-old baby could be aborted on the basis of two doctors' signatures. UK society appears confused on the morality of this, with more than

40% answering 'don't know' to the question 'what do you think the legal time limit for having an abortion should be based on?' in a 2017 poll.⁷ A 2011 survey showed 40% favouring retention of the current 24 week limit for most abortions in British law.⁸

Foetal movements can be felt well before a baby can survive outside the womb, as early as 16 weeks. When there was little other certainty about pregnancy, the beginning of movements ('quickening') was of great importance; indeed historian Edward Hall records celebratory fires in London and a *Te Deum* in St Paul's Cathedral to celebrate the announcement of the quickening of the child of Jane Seymour, third wife of Henry VIII, in 1537.⁹

44% of the UK public believe that life begins at conception according to polling

Many parents now 'announce' a pregnancy after a twelve-week dating scan, though this may have more to do with a reduction in risk of miscarriage after this date than attitudes to abortion. It is possible to 'see' a foetus on a scan at six weeks, but all that is visible is usually a heartbeat. Commercial pregnancy test kits usually show a pregnancy two weeks after conception,¹⁰ when a period would normally be missed. More sensitive tests might pick up a pregnancy after eight days. HCG is produced as early as the eight-cell stage,¹¹ well before implantation, but can also be produced at similarly low levels by other physiological processes;¹² hence even if we were able to detect it at the eight-cell stage, it might not be a clinically useful marker of conception.

Even given these difficulties in observing conception, 44% of the UK public believe that life begins at conception according to polling.¹³

the Christian perspective

Most debate within CMF has been over whether conception or implantation should be regarded as the beginning of life, with the status of the implanted embryo largely settled.

The Bible does not give an explicit and simple answer to this question. However a number of passages do talk about life before birth, which points us towards a conclusion.

the Law

To apply 'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:13) we need some understanding of what early life is. If an early embryo is a person, this command surely applies.

Some have used part of Exodus 21 to suggest that there is some difference between the foetus and any other person. 'If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows.' (Exodus 21:22)

The Revised Standard Version, widely used in the UK in the past, translated 'give birth prematurely' as 'miscarriage'. This was based on a translation from the Latin Septuagint rather than the earliest Hebrew manuscripts. The implication that the penalty for causing miscarriage was less than murder suggested to some that life *in utero* was less valuable.

Reading 'gives birth prematurely' as per the NIV, this distinction isn't present. Indeed in either reading there is some value attached to the foetus when it is known that the mother is pregnant, as the foetus is protected to a degree in its own right even if the mother is unhurt. The immediately following verses then say that life should be taken for life if there is serious injury,¹⁴ which Piper (in a more detailed summary) suggests could apply to the child as well.¹⁵ We should remember that the primary intention of this and the surrounding verses was probably to clarify 'manslaughter' provisions, rather than the status of the foetus; but even with this caveat, I don't think it can be used to devalue life *in utero*.

God's work in people's lives

'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you ...', says God to Jeremiah.¹⁶ Isaiah's perspective is similar: 'Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.' (Isaiah 49:1). Paul echoes Isaiah's statement in writing to the Galatians.¹⁷ It is clear that God has knowledge of us and purpose for us before we are born.

These verses help us to understand God's involvement in our lives. But the primary message of the passages in which they are found is not to give 'proof' of a position on early life. However such verses do make clear that God is relating to us throughout our lives, and is expecting us before we are conceived, which at least implies that even the early embryo must be part of a process in which God is already involved.

David admits that he was 'sinful from the time my mother conceived me.' (Psalm 51:5). The context here is clearly a discussion of original sin rather than of the early embryo, but the Hebrew word translated 'conceive' here is only otherwise seen in the Old Testament in the context of 'becoming pregnant', usually among animals.¹⁸

Perhaps the clearest exposition of God's work through all stages of our lives is in Psalm 139. The meditation on God's knowledge of us expresses both awe at the depth of his knowledge,¹⁹ and asks him to search us and lead us in the right way.²⁰ Part of the psalm reflects that God knew and was involved with us *in utero*.

'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 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.' (Psalm 139:13-16).

There is no specific reference to conception or implantation. Though the author was almost certainly not thinking foremost of embryology

when the Holy Spirit inspired these words, God would have known that we might come back to them with these questions more than 2,000 years later. But once again, the context of the whole psalm is more clear evidence that God is aware of, and indeed relates to us, throughout our life.

the birth of Jesus

Soon after Mary heard that she was pregnant with Jesus, she visited her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. We don't have exact gestational ages. But we do know that Elizabeth was in at least the sixth month of her pregnancy;²¹ Mary stayed with her three months, and appears to have returned home before John was born.²² We aren't given the exact gestational age for Jesus, but it seems that Mary left to visit Elizabeth very soon after Gabriel's visit to her.

John (then probably at least 26 weeks gestation) reacts to the presence of Jesus,²³ showing that it clearly is Jesus that is present in Mary's early pregnancy, not simply an anonymous group of cells.

Of course we should take care when extrapolating the miraculous conception of Jesus to other humans. Conceived of the Holy Spirit rather than of Joseph, we should exercise caution in extrapolating every presumed detail of his conception to our own. But we can nevertheless see clear evidence of life having value in the womb, very early in pregnancy.

where does this leave us?

You may be reading this concerned that I have not treated texts you have seen referenced in regard to early life as 'proof'. Or you may wonder whether Bible texts where early life conclusions are implied rather than explicit can be relied upon at all.

God knew the exact workings of early human life when these texts were inspired by his Spirit, and knew that Christians in this era would ask the questions we ask. It is important to let Scripture speak for itself, and understand the primary meaning of a text to be that which it speaks about

GO FURTHER

There are a number of logical and philosophical considerations outside the scope of this article. A masterful rebuttal of both secular and Christian objections to a 'life begins at conception' position can be found in Peter Saunders' article '*Deadly Questions ... on the status of the embryo*' which is available on the CMF website.²⁴

itself, rather than try to make it say what we want to, to further a given argument. But none of this takes away the clear suggestion in Scripture that God is intimately involved with our lives not only *in utero*, but before we are even conceived.

This may not give an absolute answer to the question 'when does life begin?' but surely places the burden of proof on those who argue for any point *after* conception: they need to be sure that God's relationship with us *doesn't* extend into the period where the early embryo is not thought to be a person. Otherwise, there is a risk that the persons created in God's image may not be afforded the treatment God would want us to give them. ■

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