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"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast? ..."

Child-Exposure among Jews and Christians

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Contraception was perhaps not simple in the ancient world, but family planning was.¹ Greek and Roman sources often state that children were abandoned immediately after the birth.² Space does not permit a full account of all the evidence of Jewish and Christian texts rejecting exposure of children, so here are just some of the most important ones. For those who are interested further, my research has resulted in a monograph on exposure among Jews and Christians,³ and I also hope to publish a popular version.⁴

The Old Testament

The Old Testament does not include an explicit ban on exposing children. But a careful reading of the Old Testament helps to understand the Jewish view, which strongly rejects the practice. On the other hand, the Greek translation (the Septuagint) clearly differs from the Hebrew text in *Exodus* 21,22-25. This legal text supposes a situation, in which two men fight and hurt a pregnant woman. While the Hebrew text (which perhaps had a long history) seems to focus on the death of the woman, the Septuagint pays attention to the foetus, attributing human value to unborn life:

"...and if two men strive and smite a woman with child, and her child be born imperfectly formed, he shall be forced to pay a penalty: as the woman's husband may lay upon him, he shall pay with a valuation. But if it be perfectly formed he shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe"

Several other passages are relevant, too: The starting point of many beautiful Psalms (*Psa* 22,9-10; *Psa* 71,6) is that God has formed the psalmist in his mother's womb and helped him during his entire life, and help is also expected in a hopeless situation. Jeremiah was still in his mother's womb, when he was chosen to serve God (*Jer* 1,5). It is understandable that these passages helped to create a context, in which exposure was considered a severe sin.

1 John Riddle has shown that contraception was more effective in the ancient world than hitherto thought, and that people also know how to produce an early abortion (*Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*. Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press, 1992).

2 In his book (*The Kindness of Strangers. The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. New York, Pantheon Books 1988), John Boswell conflated very different phenomena in abandonment or exposure, as selling own children, or even giving them to monastery. In this paper "exposure" or "abandonment" refers to the practice by parents of leaving a child without care, either hoping that somebody saves it, or without such intention, even killing the child.

3 *Sacrosanctum animal. Exposure of Children among Jews and Christians* (forthcoming).

4 *All Life belongs to God* (forthcoming).

The practice in the Graeco-Roman world

The phenomenon of exposure often appears in mythology or drama, but frequent reference to the practice indicates that it belonged to the harsh reality of the ancient world. The practice among the Graeco-Roman world is traditionally well investigated,⁵ and although scholars disagree on many points, we can safely list the main reasons for the exposure of new-born children.

Many Greek and Roman sources state that sons were preferred to daughters, and it led parents to abandon new-born girls. We have several, unambiguous, passages in which the husband orders a check of the sex of the child, and, if she is female, casts her out and perhaps even kills her.

Children were often exposed for economic reasons. On the one hand poor people were not able to feed their offspring, but on the other hand, rich people were unwilling to share their property between too many children. Ancient families were mostly small and seldom had more than two sons and one daughter.

Of all children born in the ancient world, the seemingly handicapped were in greatest danger. Soranus, the most famous physician in his *Gynaecology*, distinguishes sharply between healthy and unhealthy children, considering the sick ones "not worth rearing". We also know that Romans, especially in earlier times, considered badly malformed children bad omens. Livy said that soothsayers encouraged officials to bring such a child to the sea and sink it in its depths.

Other reasons such as extra-marital birth or bad omens at the moment of birth occur, but the simplest of all was that a child was not needed. Generally speaking, the ancient world divided sharply into two spheres, the State and the individual. To raise or to abandon a child, both in the Greek and Roman worlds, was a decision which was taken by the parents, or more exactly, by the father. *Patria potestas* was an old Roman principle, and it meant that contraception, abortion and exposure did not belong to the State. Although many rulers tried to encourage people to raise more children, the principle was not overruled before the 4th century AD.

Some philosophers were critical, but mostly even they seem to have thought that exposure was a crime against the State, as Themistius later formulated it, not against an individual child.

The destiny of abandoned children varied greatly. Some of them were killed by their parents or died soon after abandonment, but others were picked up by strangers, and as Juvenalis said "they received what Fortuna happened to give them". They might have received a good home and the status of own child in a family, but mostly their luck was bad. Some of them were raised to become slaves, but they could also end up in brothels, begging for money for their patron or fighting as gladiators. Once raised by a stranger, they were under his control. Exposure thus did not necessarily lead to death.

We do not know how much contraception restricted fertility, and the infant mortality rate was very high at that time, which makes it impossible to give even a rough estimate of the number of abandoned children. Classical antiquity lasted more than thousand years and included different nations and cultures. The number of children cast out certainly varied. For example, people in Greece and in Egypt acted differently, and the reason was at least partly economic: the small fields in Greece were not enough to feed large families, but agriculture in Egypt needed significantly more people. No wonder that the families of Ptolemaic officers could be large, as papyri reveal.

Early Judaism

It is no longer adequate to treat early Judaism as a monolithic unity. The views were different in Palestine (perhaps also in Judaea and Galilee, and certainly among different Jewish groups) and in Egypt, and we know very little about the life of Jews in Asia Minor or Greece. Different authors may represent broader circles or voice their own opinions. However, we have strong evidence that Jewish teachers criticised the practice of abandoning children.

The Third Sibyl, in which a Jewish writer, pretending to be the famous Gentile prophetess Sibyl, gives moral instruction, was written in the second century BC in Egypt:

⁵ The best introduction to the theme is William Harris' "Child-exposure in the Roman Empire", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994),1-22. On Jewish and Christian texts, see E. Eyben, "Family Planning in Graeco-Roman Antiquity", *Ancient society* 11-12 (1980-1981),5-82.

"But urge on your minds in your breast and shun unlawful worship. Worship the Living One. Avoid adultery and indiscriminate intercourse with males. Rear your own offspring and do not kill it, for the Immortal is angry at whoever commits these sins" (3,762-766).

It is interesting that the banning of the abandonment of new-born children belongs to the very few ethical rules, which are given to Gentiles. Similarly, an anonymous Jewish writer taking the name and metre of Phocylides (perhaps about 100 AD) takes up the theme:

"Do not let a woman destroy the unborn babe in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before the dogs and the vultures as a prey" (184-185).

These two texts attest the Jewish view that abandoning new-born children was considered a significant moral issue, which was one of the first themes to discuss with Gentiles – or with Jews, who were tempted to follow Gentile way of life.

But Jewish teachers did not only give ethical rules, but they also looked forward to the end of the world. *The First Enoch* chapters 91-105 (written about 170 BC) considers men becoming cruel and godless towards the end of the world, and a part of it is that they abandon their children:

"In those days, they (the women) shall become pregnant, but they (the sinners) shall come out and abort their infants and cast them out from their midst; they shall (also) abandon their (other) children, casting their infants out while they are still suckling. They shall neither return to them (their babes) nor have compassion upon their beloved ones" (1 En. 99,5)

The First Enoch is the first of several Jewish and Christian works which looks forward to the coming judgement, where people cruelly exposing their children will face their verdict.

The most important Jewish writers, Philo and Josephus, both condemn exposure, the former having grown up in Egypt and the latter in Palestine. Moreover, several Gentile writers say that Jews were not allowed to abandon their children.

The Christian Writers

As is the Old Testament so also the New Testament is completely silent on child-exposure (if *Eph* 6:4 does not deal with it), but like Jewish writers, early Christian writers unanimously condemn the practice. It means that a strong oral tradition must be supposed. It is easy to trace the roots of the instruction, because the earliest Christian texts, *Didache* and *The Epistle of Barnabas* use a common source, a Jewish original, which is now lost. The words in *Didache* are typical of early Christian teaching. Like *The Epistle of Barnabas*, it presents the way of light and the way of darkness, and lists the deed of both. Exposure occurs in both parts of the instruction:

"Do not steal, do not practice magic, do not use enchanted potions, do not abort a foetus or kill a child that is born" (Did 2,2).

"... For they love what is vain and pursue a reward, showing no mercy to the poor nor toiling for the oppressed nor knowing the one who made them; murderers of children and corruptors of what God has fashioned..." (Did 5,2).

The tradition of rejecting exposure was strong among early Christian apologists, such as Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Tertullian, Minucius Felix and *The Epistle to Diognetus* (from c. 160AD to c. 220AD). Many Christian texts adopted the Jewish tradition, in which sinners, who had abandoned their sons and daughters, received severe *post mortem* punishments. Pre-Constantine Christian teachers in the third century AD, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origenes, Methodius and Lactantius condemn the practice with strong words. Augustine in the West and Basil in the East finally fixed the Christian view on exposure. When the Church condemned the practice in councils, the State had already made it criminal.

Some Short Notes on Arguments

The most striking observation arising from an analysis of the Christian argumentation, is that Christians mainly adopted and repeated Jewish arguments against exposure. The earliest texts, as *Didache* quoted above, do not have arguments at all. The ban is only expressed in short terms, as in later catechisms. Of course, some crucial elements were changed; While Jews considered procreation

a duty, the Christian ideal rapidly turned towards praise of virginity. Both traditions tended to forget the words in *Prov* 5:5 and *1 Cor* 7:1-7 and consider procreation the only honourable function of sexual intercourse. But both Jews and Christians considered the practice cruel and inhuman and described the destiny of children: beasts, slavery or worse. Both expressed the strong view that abandoning children was against God's commands, which undoubtedly mostly meant the fifth commandment. Precisely here was the main difference from the current Greek and Roman view, according to which nobody other than the father decided whether the child should live or die. In Jewish and Christian opinion that decision was made when God formed the child in the womb of his / her mother. That was the reason why they rejected both abortion and exposure. Man is, in Lactantius' words, "*sacrosanctum animal*", a holy being and protected by God, and not allowed to be hurt.

Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian texts dealing with exposure of infants provide a fascinating window into the life of ancient people. It is impossible to read these texts without thinking about our debate on abortion. The arguments on all sides are too similar to be overlooked. Today, we ask whether the State with its laws or an individual with her needs has the right to make the decision on the destiny of the unborn life. But what does it show about our society that God, who in early Jewish and Christian view alone made this decision, does not play a role in this debate?

Bibliography & Recommended Further Reading:

John Riddle: *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*. Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press, 1992

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