

Does The Bible Speak to Embryonic Stem Cell Research?

By Bradley Mattes, MBS

It's not likely that any of the Old Testament prophets were versed in the modern technology of human embryonic stem cell (hESC) research. A word search of the Apostle's inspired writings won't reveal a dissertation, big or small, on the pros and cons of embryonic versus adult stem cells.

However, the Scriptures have provided biblical principles to safely lead us through this often confusing and technical, yet controversial, issue. Yes, the Bible does indeed speak to man regarding God's will on hESC.

If we are to look to the Bible for guidance on current issues of the day, we must first accept that the Holy Word of God is the ultimate authority directing man's path. Perhaps the most familiar Bible passage that speaks to this is 2 Timothy 3:16. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Timothy says it well. "Scripture is God-breathed" which means it's from God's mouth to our ears. There's no more reliable and authoritative source than that. But this passage goes further. It explains that the Bible can be depended upon for "teaching, rebuking or training" to help us do things in a moral and upstanding manner. This certainly applies to hESC, as most of us can use much more teaching

and training in this high tech and ethically challenged arena. Once biblically trained, we will be well "equipped" for pleasing our Lord in thought, word and deed.

Reinforcing the Bible's authority is 2 Peter 1:20-21, which tells us that Scripture reflects God's will, not ours. "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." When our desires conflict with those of the Lord, it is God's opinion that should rule the day.

To effectively address God's will on hESC we must first understand the basic biology behind the very first days of human life. Upon the union of the male sperm and female ovum, fertilization occurs. What results is a single-celled fertilized oocyte (egg) or zygote. Within that single cell is everything you are today: your

sex, shoe size, eye color, or any genetic predisposition to future disease. All that is added to the fertilized egg is oxygen and nutrition. Upon fertilization, this single cell contains forty-six human chromosomes that make him or her uniquely human. No other person like you ever existed in the past, nor will in the future. You were truly created by your Heavenly Father as one-of-a-kind.

Toward the end of first week of human life, the single cell grows into several hundred and is called a blastocyst or embryo. At one week, after



COMMENTARY

floating down the mother's fallopian tube, the embryo will implant into the endometrium or lining of the uterus. Three days later he or she sends a chemical hormonal message to stop the mother's menstrual period and announces the presence of the baby. Three days after that, the embryonic heart begins to beat, and will continue until death in old age or otherwise. Three weeks later brain waves are measurable.

The biological evidence certainly indicates that life begins at conception or fertilization. But does Scripture back this up? Absolutely. Psalm 51:5 says, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." We were sinners, needful of a Savior, from the moment of conception, which indicates God's love and concern for us from the very first moment of our biological lives. Yes, God recognizes us as human life, worthy of protection, from the moment of fertilization. As a matter of fact, God knew and loved us even before then. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart;" Jeremiah 1:5.

Once we understand the basic biological facts of the first days of life, we can begin to effectively consider the ethics of hESC research. A stem cell is considered a "blank" cell. It's capable of becoming a more differentiated cell, i.e., one that is programmed for function, such as a nerve or muscle cell.

The single-cell zygote or fertilized egg is called an omnipotent cell because it will develop into an entire human being. After the zygote begins to rapidly divide, these cells are then called an em-

bryo. The tiny developing embryo contains cells, which are called pluripotent. These cells are still undifferentiated, but will develop into various specific organs, such as liver, brain, lung or heart. They are commonly known as embryonic stem cells. In order to obtain access to embryonic stem cells, researchers must slice open a five- to seven-day old embryo and extract the stem cells from the inner cell mass. This process of harvesting the stem cells will result in the death of the tiny human embryo.



The human sacrifice required for hESC can be contrasted with *adult* stem cells that are obtained from already born humans. They are found in umbilical cord blood, bone marrow, fat, skin and other organs - even from cadavers up to twenty hours after death. At first it was believed

adult stem cells were multipotent, or not as versatile as hESCs. However, new research is pushing the envelope and scientists now believe there are realistic hopes of "tweaking" adult stem cells into performing as the more primitive embryonic cells.

Clearly we know that hESC research kills human life at its earliest stage. Therefore it violates biblical principles that all innocent human life is sacred, and that God alone has the right to end it. Scripture speaks to this directly.

In Exodus 20:13 God specifically commands, "You shall not murder." Additional detailed guidance is given regarding life before birth in Exodus 21:22-25. "If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must

COMMENTARY

be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

God is not an uncaring deity who commands that his human subjects follow His decrees. The Bible shows that our Creator has a special love-relationship with mankind. We were set apart from the rest of creation. Human life is precious to God. Genesis 2:7 tells us “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” While God spoke creation into being, He took a more personal approach to creating man. He put part of himself into man. By His own breath He breathed man into being.

Psalm 139:13-14 demonstrates that man understands this special relationship with God and rejoices in it. “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.”

When God created the universe and everything in it, he did so with order and purpose. He put into place a natural law that would set guidelines for His glorious creation.

This natural law reacts to man violating God's will regarding hESC research. Sin comes with consequences. Romans 1:20 “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has

been made, so that men are without excuse.” It should come as no surprise to man that he experience negative ramifications for rejecting God's Word regarding the killing of innocent human embryos. Romans tells us man has no excuse for his defiance.

Galatians 6:7-8 tells us that man will reap sorrow and destruction if he disobeys God's Word. “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction;”



This is illustratively spelled out by what we see in the wake of hESC research. This unethical experimentation does not have our Lord's blessing. Instead it is invoking His wrath evidenced in the following ways:

Advocates of hESCs say they are more “plastic” and able to develop into any type of cell. However, that plasticity is a double-edged sword. It cases them to develop and multiply out of control, in spite of the scientists' best efforts.

Researchers are struggling with the difficulty of preventing hESCs, for example injected into heart tissue, from turning into various other kinds of cells, such as brain or skin cells.

One of the most serious side effects is the likelihood that hESCs would “explode into a cancerous mass” after they've been transplanted into the mature tissue of a patient. Embryonic stem cells are immunogenic. Embryos used at random are likely to be rejected by the host's body. If this occurs, the patient will be required to take anti-rejection drugs for life. This is not a

COMMENTARY

problem when, in most cases, ethical adult stem cells are harvested from the patient's own body.

In the debate over embryonic versus adult stem cells, God's natural law and His blessing are self-evident. To date there have been no breakthroughs or treatments with hESC research. In contrast, the National Institutes on Health report there have been over one hundred health disorders and conditions treated in patients using adult stem cells.

Let us always remember that hESC research kills human embryos. Advocates of this unethical and unproven experimentation consistently substitute the term "kill" with "destroy." In effect, this dehumanizes the tiny human being created and loved by God. In our common vernacular, we destroy "things" but we "kill" human beings. Those who promote hESC research want you to think of the embryos who are sacrificed as things not humans. The watchful Christian should always note this subtle salesmanship as we consume information on this issue.

Since we have the ultimate authority of Scripture, we can filter everything we hear and read through God's Word. Anything that conflicts with the Bible is false.

Human embryonic stem cell research kills innocent human life during his or her first days of existence. This is in direct conflict with Scripture, which tells us life is sacred from the moment of fertilization until our Creator, and only the Creator, decides to end it. The Bible speaks clearly on this issue. Human embryonic stem cell research should not be practiced or supported. **MJ**

Bradley Mattes is the Executive Director and co-founder of Life Issues Institute, an international pro-life educational organization. He also serves on the faculty of Master's International School of Divinity.

References for this Article

- 1 All quoted Scripture is from the NIV.
- 2 Moore, Persaud Saunders, *The Developing Human, Clinically Oriented Embryology*, 6th Edition, 1998, pp. 2 & 18.
- 3 Wilcox AJ, Baird DD, Weinberg CR, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 199; 340, pp. 1796-1799.
- 4 Tanner JM, Taylor GR, *Growth*, NY: Life Science Library, 1965, p. 64.
- 5 Hamlin H, "Life or Death by EEG", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, October 12, 1964, p. 113.
- 6 Jonietz E, "Innovation: Sourcing Stem Cells", *Technology Review*, January/February 2001.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 "Pros and Cons of Embryonic and Adult Stem Cells", *Stem Cell Research Facts*, located at http://www.stemcellresearchfacts.com/pros_cons.html, accessed March 29, 2007.
- 9 Letter from James F. Battey, Jr., Dir. Of Stem cell Task Force of the NIH to Cong. Mark Souder, Sept. 8, *Congressional Record*, Sept. 9, 2004, H-6956.

