The Beginning of Human Life, Addendum I:
Conception and Fertilization: Defining Ethically Relevant Terms

Summary

Scientifically CMDA understands that human life begins at fertilization (See CMDA Statement: The Beginning of Human Life). The Bible states that human life begins at the absolute "beginning or inception" using the term "conception." Because the term "conception" has been variously (re)defined in the current scientific, medical, and bioethics literature. Christian's may become confused over the Church's creedal, doctrinal, biblical, liturgical, traditional, and cultural language of, "Life begins at/with conception." CMDA affirms that it is appropriate to maintain the traditional biblical and creedal language of the Church without accommodation, remaining biologically precise and accurate, with the understanding that "conception" refers to the absolute "beginning or inception" of life, which is determined scientifically and upheld by CMDA to be fertilization.

Argument

Questions of morality and ethics are frequently questions of language and definition. The terms "conception" and "fertilization" are central and critical terms in any definition of the beginning of life. In traditional ways of speaking conception was assumed to be synonymous with fertilization and, as used in traditional orthodox Christian language, marked the very beginning of individual human life. This is no longer the case. Presently these terms are being used in different ways by different organizations for the purpose of promoting certain ethical agendas. In particular, the previously univocal term "conception" is now open to multiple definitions and interpretations. For instance, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology has now (re)defined conception as "implantation."[1] The scientific and medical literature no longer defines conception in a manner consistent with Biblical and traditional use of this term in reference to the beginning of human life. The current CMDA Position Statement on The Beginning of Human Life correctly and precisely defines the biological beginning of individual human life as fertilization. Recognizing that a multiplicity of competing definitions may generate some confusion, there nonetheless remain good reasons for the Christian community to retain the language, "Life begins at/with conception" (understanding that the use of the term "conception" means "beginning" which is at the point of "fertilization").

Traditional Language of the Christian Church

The traditional language of Conservative and Evangelical Protestants, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic believers has always been, "Life begins at/with conception" (Cf. Euangelium Vitae).[2] This has traditionally meant "beginning" and was assumed to be at the moment of fertilization.

Creedal Language of the Christian Church

The strongest argument in the CMDA Statement on The Beginning of Life, and for any Christian, is the incarnation (Isa 7:14;[3] Mat 1:20; Luk 1:31). The foundational language for this doctrine is that of the historic ecumenical Christian creeds, primarily the received text of the

Apostolic Creed in which the term "conceived by the Holy Spirit (Ghost)" is used throughout in all English translations to designate the inception, or beginning, of the incarnation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.[4] The use of the term "conceived" in these passages is not to be confused with current scientific and medical definitions but is to be understood as referring to the absolute "beginning or inception" which is scientifically defined as fertilization.

Biblical Language

In all predominant English translations of the Bible (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NAS, NIV, NAB) the terms "conception" and "conceived" are employed to translate Hebrew and Greek words that have the specific connotation of "beginning of life" or the "inception of life." "Conception" or "conceived" are used to translate the Hebrew hrh ("harah") and either the Greek gennaw ("gennao" in Mat 1:20, which can mean "conceive," "beget," "to father," but unambiguously "to conceive" in this context;[5] Cf. also John 8:41; 9:34 and the translation in BGD: "you were altogether conceived in sin"[6]) or sullamba,nw ("syllambano" Gen 4:1; 30:7 in LXX, and Luke 1:24, 31, 36; figuratively in Jas 1:15, which can mean "to seize," as with child, or "conceive"[7]). Harah is used in Gen 4:1; 16:4,5; 19:36; 25:21; 30:7; 38:18, etc. (and see especially Isa 7:14; LXX: gastri. e[xei, "conceive" or "become pregnant") and its semantic domain is consistent with the traditional use of the term "conception" meaning "to beget," "to become the parent of," "to cause something to come into existence," "to conceive."[8] It's also important to appreciate this term's use within the redemptive-historical language of YHWH's "conception" of a people before "giving birth" to them in actual history (Cf. Num 11:12). In particular, Hos 9:11 implies that conception (!Ayr'h "herayon" a unique, single, one-time event, not a process or state of being; the inception of pregnancy; result of sexual intercourse, etc.) is to be distinguished from and precedes the state of being pregnant (!j,B,ÞmiW "yum-baten" "from," "of," or "on account of the womb"; "state of being pregnant") or of giving birth (dl;y" "yalad" "bear, bring forth, beget"; "to birth").

On the other hand, Psalm 5:7 uses the terms lyx ("chul" "writhe in pain" or "birth pains associated with labor and giving birth") and ~xy ("yacham" "conceive," used only in this instance in the Bible with respect to human conception or becoming pregnant by an act of sexual intercourse, otherwise used in respect to animals in heat). "Three words are used in relation to the birth process: harah "conceive," yalad "bear, give birth" and chul "to labor in giving birth." Another word for conceive is yacham, used more, however, of animals in heat (but cf. Ps 51:7). The first describes the inception and the latter two the termination of the process." [9]

Recognizing that these Hebrew and Greek terms were not used in the context of a modern biological understanding of human reproduction, the term "conceive" (or "conception") is consistently used to translate those Hebrew and Greek terms that have the specific connotation of "the very earliest beginning," "inception," or "the very bringing into existence." Consequently, "conception" and its cognates, as they are understood in the context of these passages, refer to the biological point of fertilization.

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[1]EC Hughes and Committee of Terminology of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, *Obstetrics-Gynecologic Terminology* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1972).

[2] John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter: The Gospel of Life (Euangelium Vitae, Vatican Translation)*, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1995).

[3] It is sometimes alleged that the phraseology of Isa 7:14 is found in Ugaritic texts (UT 16: nos. 77, 11.5, 7), and that it is only a formula announcing the arrival of a royal heir to be born naturally. In the Ugaritic passage the verb *hry* "be pregnant" is not used at all, while the text does speak of a virgin (*btlt*) who will later bear a child naturally. Interestingly, the Ugaritic line in poetic parallelism uses the word for "virgin" cognate to the Hebrew `hm'l.[;` "*'alma*" (q.v.) of Isa 7:14. The case in Isa 7:14 is different. In this verse the prophet speaks of a *pregnant virgin*, using the participle (or adj.) of *harah*. The announcement is similar to Gen 16:11 addressed to Hagar who had conceived and was pregnant. As far as the grammar goes, this could refer to a pregnant virgin either contemporary or in the future, but the reference to virginity shows that the pregnancy is miraculous. See HG Stigers, "`hrh`" in RL Harris GL Archer BK Waltke (Eds.) *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT), Volume 1* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 223.

[4] The "received" form of the Apostles' Creed (ultimate text of the Western Creed from Priminius, A.D. 750, but dating back to Rome circa A.D. 340) reads in Latin as *"qui <u>conceptus</u> est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria virgine"* and in Greek as `"to,n` <u>`sullhfqe,nta`</u> `e;k pneu,matoj agi,ou, gennhqe,nta ek Mari,aj thj parqe,nou"` *("who was <u>conceived</u> by the Holy Ghost/Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary")*. These texts are taken from the *Psalterium Graecum et Romanum,* erroneously ascribed to Pope Gregory the Great, first published from a MS. preserved in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, by Archbishop Usher: *De Romanae Ecclesiae Symbolo Apostolico vetere*, London, 1647. An old Roman form given by Rufinus (*Forma Vetus*, A.D. 390) reads as, *"qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto et Maria virgine"* *("was born by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary")* and an African form (*Symbolum Augustini Hippo Regius, Africa* Circ. A.D. 400) reads, *"qui natus est per Spiritum Sanctum ex virgine Maria."* The earliest Greek form, probably used as a baptismal confession (St. Irenaeus, A.D. 200), reads, `"to,n sarkwqe,nta thj hmete,ras swthriaj a;nqrwpoj e,ge,neto"` *("was incarnate as our Savior, and became man"),* while the text of Marcellus, *Professio Fidei Marcelli Ancyrani* (A.D. 336-341), reads, `"to,n gennhqe,nta e,k pneu,matoj agi,ou kai. Mari,aj thj parqe,nou"` *("was born by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary").* Sources found in: Philip Schaff (Ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom, With a History and Critical Notes, Volume II: The Greek and Latin Creeds with Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990 reprint of the 1931 edition).

[5] W Bauer, FW Gingrich, FW Danker (BGD), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (translation and adaptation of W Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur, Fifth Edition, 1958)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 155.

[6] BGD, p. 155.

7 BGD, p. 776-7; DH Field, "Conceive, Apprehend" in C Brown (Ed.) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT), Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), pp. 343-4; G Kittel and G Friedrich *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT), abridged in one volume by GW Bromiley* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), p. 1101.

[8] F Brown (Ed.) *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), pp. 247-8; V Hamilton, "`hrh`" in WA VanGemeren (Ed.) *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis (NIDOTTE), Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), pp. 1057-60; *TWOT*, p. 223.

[9] HG Stiger in *TWOT*, p. 223.