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HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL REFERENCES IN PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE COURT OPINIONS

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The Supreme Court's unanimous decisions and concurring opinions of June 26, 1997, upheld the constitutionality of the New York and Washington laws interdicting physician-assisted suicide.¹ These opinions did not venture back, as lower courts had, into the legal history of the issue beyond brief mention of British common law. Furthermore, the Justices studiously avoided the course of philosophically and theologically-based moral discourse on suicide and euthanasia. They did, however, urge the American people to sustain debate on physician-assisted suicide in public fora and legislative assemblies with a view to the High Court's reconsideration of the matter when new laws, challenged, reach the final stage of the appellate process.

Suicide and euthanasia will undoubtedly be vigorously debated not only as legal, but also as moral issues. The role of religious traditions in this debate, and how these traditions should effect and affect public policy, must also be addressed. Suicide and euthanasia raise important issues which theological reflection has addressed for centuries. Theological beliefs affect what people think about issues central to this debate, such as how people cope with pain and suffering, what they believe follows death, and whether they believe their bodies are theirs to do with as they please. Three-quarters of all Americans claim their religious beliefs are the primary influence on how they find guidance in their lives.² This is particularly the case with issues of life and death. Whether or not one agrees with the theological

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1. See *Vacco v. Quill*, 117 S. Ct. 2293 (1997); *Washington v. Glucksberg* 117 S. Ct. 2258 (1997).

2. A number of studies found that between 66 and 77% of Americans agreed with statements like: "My religious faith is the most important influence in my life." See DAVID B. LARSON & SUSAN S. LARSON, NATIONAL INST. FOR HEALTHCARE RESEARCH, *THE FORGOTTEN FACTOR IN PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SHOW?* 6-9 (1994).

conclusions, they remain of utmost importance to the public and hence in setting public policy.³

Given the dominant role played by Judeo-Christian traditions in America, understanding the theological and historical perspectives of Christianity remains important in discussions of public policy on suicide and euthanasia. It is indisputable that a *distorted* understanding of this, or any other, religious tradition should not impact the formulation of public policy. Yet this is precisely what happened in two recent judicial opinions on physician-assisted suicide, one being the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decision reversed by the Supreme Court.⁴ This article shall seek to demonstrate the theological and historical inaccuracies in these opinions and to correct those misunderstandings. As judicial and legislative bodies struggle with physician-assisted suicide, it is imperative that their policies be based on accurate information.

HISTORY AND THEOLOGY IN PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE OPINIONS

Judge Richard C. Kaufman raised the issue of Christian history and beliefs in his 1993 opinion on Michigan's law proscribing assisted suicide.⁵ Dr. Jack Kevorkian, charged with violating this statute, challenged its constitutionality.⁶ Judge Kaufman denied the motion, but acknowledged there was significant merit in the claim that a fundamental right to terminate one's own life exists, especially for terminally ill persons with intolerable pain.⁷

An important initial step in evaluating this claim, according to Judge Kaufman, was to examine its merits in light of the history and traditions of this nation.⁸ He noted the importance of the legal, social, and moral history of issues before courts, referring in particular to the majority opinion in *Roe v. Wade*:

Most strikingly, in *Roe v. Wade* . . . the Court justified its result, in part, by an appeal to history

. . . .

3. See generally Thane Josef Messinger, *A Gentle and Easy Death: From Ancient Greece to Beyond Cruzan: Toward a Reasoned Legal Response to the Societal Dilemma of Euthanasia*, 71 DENV. U. L. REV. 175 (1993).

4. See *Compassion in Dying v. Washington*, 79 F.3d 790 (9th Cir. 1990), *rev'd sub nom. Washington v. Glucksberg* 117 S. Ct. 2258 (1997).

5. See *People v. Kevorkian*, No. 93-11482, 1993 WL 603212 (Mich. Cir. Ct. Dec. 13, 1993).

6. See *id.* at *1.

7. See *id.* at *18.

8. See *id.* at *8.

. . . Just as the Roe Court found some support for abortion being freely practiced in Greek and Roman times, there is significant support that historical attitudes toward suicide were not in line with a blanket proscription. The idea that one's honor or one's quality of life would allow society to recognize the act of suicide as not contrary to societal norms has great historical support.⁹

Judge Kaufman's short survey of classical attitudes toward suicide, although containing minor factual errors, is accurate insofar as ancient Greek and Roman law did not prohibit either abortion or suicide. Indeed, some philosophical schools regarded suicide as the ultimate expression of human freedom. Other philosophical schools, however, especially Pythagoreanism (as ostensibly manifested in the so-called Hippocratic Oath), condemned the act under all circumstances.

When Judge Kaufman addressed ancient Jewish and early Christian attitudes toward suicide, his analysis became grossly distorted. He claimed that five biblical characters committed suicide, for which none received condemnation or even negative comment.¹⁰ According to him, the Christian Church, under the influence of Augustine, did not prohibit suicide until the sixth century and then "it had a difficult time in supporting this new position on the basis of the Scriptures."¹¹ He concluded that "there is significant support in our traditions and history for the view approving suicide or attempted suicide."¹²

Judge Kaufman quoted Justice Blackmun in *Roe v. Wade* to support his thesis that the so-called Hippocratic Oath's condemnation of abortion and assisted suicide represented a minority (i.e. Pythagorean) view. Having articulated the assessment of early Christianity's openness to suicide summarized above, Judge Kaufman concluded: "But with the end of antiquity, a decided change took place. Resistance against suicide and against abortion became common. The Oath came to be popular. The emerging teachings of Christianity were in agreement with the Pythagorean ethic."¹³ Space does not permit a discussion of alternative interpretations of Judge Kaufman's four ambiguous sentences. However, nothing in *Roe v. Wade* suggests that Justice Blackmun questioned the easily demonstrable and well-known

9. *Id.* at *9-11.

10. *See id.* at *11.

11. *Id.* (referring to the writings of Alfred Alvarez, *The Background in SUICIDE, THE PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES* 7, 12-13 (M. Pabst Battin & David J. Mayo eds., 1980)).

12. *Id.* at *13.

13. *Id.*

fact that abortion was consistently and uncompromisingly condemned in early Christian literature. We certainly would not accuse him of being so ignorant of the history of abortion as to think that early Christianity did not condemn abortion until the fifth century. But this is exactly what Judge Kaufman has done by combining his assertion of the ostensible similarities between the moral history of abortion and suicide with his insistence that early Christians both approved and widely practiced suicide before Augustine's time.¹⁴

Judge Reinhardt, in his Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals opinion reversed by the Supreme Court, similarly availed himself of history and tradition to support his ruling.¹⁵ Although examined more briefly, and without addressing early Christian attitudes toward abortion, Judge Reinhardt espoused the same mistaken view of Christian history. Duncan and Lubin critiqued his overall historical survey, but did not address early Christian history and only briefly examined his use of the biblical suicide accounts.¹⁶ After noting the ancient Roman and Greek approval of many suicides, Judge Reinhardt claimed, "The early Christians saw death as an escape from the tribulations of a fallen existence and as the doorway to heaven."¹⁷ He similarly claimed that none of the four (*sic*) Old Testament suicides "is treated as an act worthy of censure" and "the suicide of Judas Iscariot is not treated as a further sin, rather as an act of repentance."¹⁸ He also attributed suicide's condemnation to Augustine, "[p]rompted in large part by the utilitarian concern that the rage for suicide would deplete the ranks of Christians."¹⁹

The same set of presuppositions and conclusions inform the opinions of both judges:

1. The Old and New Testaments do not condemn suicide, rather their theology, especially the latter's, encourages it.
2. This is particularly the case with martyrdom, which is, after all, a form of suicide.
3. Furthermore, early Christians craved death because life was so burdened by sin and guilt, and heaven so

14. See *id.* at *11-12.

15. See *Compassion in Dying v. Washington*, 79 F.3d 790, 803-810 (9th Cir. 1996) (en banc).

16. See generally Dwight G. Duncan & Peter Lubin, *The Use and Abuse of History in Compassion in Dying*, 20 HARV. J.L. & PUB. POL'Y 175 (1996).

17. *Compassion in Dying*, 79 F.3d at 808.

18. *Id.* at 808 n.25.

19. *Id.* at 808.

eagerly anticipated that many who could not provoke pagans to martyr them took their own lives.

4. Only in the early fifth century, owing to Augustine's determination to end the self-destructive actions decimating the ranks of the church, did Christians first proscribe suicide, thus instituting a legacy of inflexible intolerance.

Before addressing these issues directly, it is reasonable to suggest why these two judges have such similar misunderstandings of suicide in early Christianity. In their treatment of pre-Christian Judaism and early Christianity, both relied primarily upon a popularized account written by a poet, literary critic, and playwright, Alfred Alvarez.²⁰ The historical and theological presuppositions and conclusions of Alvarez are consistent with those of many philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and popular authors who have recently written, even incidentally, on suicide among early Christians.²¹

The current popularly held understanding of suicide in early Christianity suggests not only an ignorance of early Christian theology and history but also the conceptual influence of Émile Durkheim, the father of academic sociology in France. His *Le suicide: étude sociologique* was published in 1897 but not translated into English until 1951. His definition of suicide, well-known to students of the social sciences, includes "all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result."²²

Durkheim denies the relevance of motivation in determining the morality of the act. Suicide is any action, or lack of action, which results in one's own death regardless of whether the individual actually desired to die. Hence, he classifies the death of Christian martyrs as (altruistic) suicide, since they voluntarily allowed their own slaughter:

Though they did not kill themselves, they sought death with all their power and behaved so as to make it inevitable. To be suicide, the act from which death must neces-

20. See Alvarez, *supra* note 11, at 7-32.

21. See, e.g., MARGARET PABST BATTIN, *THE LEAST WORST DEATH: ESSAYS IN BIOETHICS ON THE END OF LIFE* (1994); JAMES T. CLEMONS, *WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT SUICIDE?* (1990); ARTHUR J. DROGE & JAMES D. TABOR, *A NOBLE DEATH: SUICIDE AND MARTYRDOM AMONG CHRISTIANS AND JEWS IN ANTIQUITY* (1992); GLANVILLE WILLIAMS, *THE SANCTITY OF LIFE AND THE CRIMINAL LAW* (1957).

22. ÉMILE DURKHEIM, *SUICIDE: A STUDY IN SOCIOLOGY* 44 (J.A. Spaulding & G. Simpson trans., Free Press 1951).

sarily result need only have been performed by the victim with full knowledge of the facts. Besides, the passionate enthusiasm with which the believers in the new religion faced final torture shows that at this moment they had completely discarded their personalities for the idea of which they had become the servants.²³

According to Durkheim, dying for one's beliefs is suicide. Those who commit suicide are, in his construct, victims of pathological social phenomena. Martyrs are victims not of the people who kill them, but of their own religious group's demand for excessive integration, control, and regimentation. Not surprisingly, when scholars apply Durkheim's grid to the history of pre-Christian Judaism and early Christianity, apparently ignorant of actual historical details and the most fundamental beliefs and values of both, the results are as distorted as the presuppositions and conclusions of Judges Kaufman and Reinhardt.

BIBLICAL NARRATIVES AND ETHICS

The Bible does not explicitly condemn those who commit suicide. Seven suicides are recorded in the Bible, not five as claimed by Alvarez and Judges Kaufman and Reinhardt. Six occur in the Old Testament: Abimelech (who is assisted in suicide), Samson, Ahithophel, King Zimri, King Saul, and Saul's armor bearer; one occurs in the New Testament (Judas Iscariot).²⁴ Both judges simply noted the lack of explicit condemnation of suicide in these passages and deduced that no condemnation is thereby intended. They then extrapolated this finding to the whole Bible. Noting the lack of any command like "Thou shalt not kill yourself!" they claimed Scripture nowhere condemns suicide. As we will see later, they ignored how Judaism and Christianity have historically interpreted their Scriptures.

23. *Id.* at 227.

24. Abimelech, an early warrior, was seriously injured by a millstone thrown from a tower he was attacking, and persuaded his armor-bearer to kill him with his sword. *See Judges* 9:52-54. Samson died when he dislodged the supporting pillars of a house causing it to fall on himself and thousands of Philistines. *See Judges* 16:28-31. King Saul, mortally wounded after battle, threw himself on his own sword. *See 1 Samuel* 31:1-6; *1 Chronicles* 10:1-6. Saul's armor-bearer similarly fell on his sword. *See 1 Samuel* 31:5. Ahithophel, the king's counselor, strangled himself when his counsel was rejected. *See 2 Samuel* 17:23. King Zimri burned his house upon himself after learning he had been overthrown. *See 1 Kings* 16:18. Judas Iscariot hanged himself when he realized what he had done in betraying Jesus Christ. *See Matthew* 27:3-5; *but cf. Acts* 1:18.

While the Bible does contain significant legal material (most notably, the Pentateuch), it must also be seen as an intricate work of literature. Recent biblical scholarship has revived interest in the literary nature of the Bible.²⁵ This has been particularly important with Old Testament narratives, or stories. The type, or genre, of literature to which a passage belongs strongly influences how one discovers its intended meaning. For example, when we read poetry we expect to find figurative language and should be less inclined to interpret everything literally compared to when we read history textbooks. Similarly we must note the genre of the biblical suicide accounts and recognize the literary conventions used to convey meaning by the authors.²⁶

Literary conventions are commonly recognized in poetry. The study of literary patterns in narrative is called poetics. While poetics alone will not ensure accurate interpretations, ignoring poetics can lead to meanings the author could never have envisioned. "It is precisely in response to this danger, that a study of the poetics of Hebrew narrative can provide some controls. Since its concern is to recover, as far as possible, an ancient literary competence, poetics offers a safeguard against reading texts according to arbitrary or anachronistic criteria."²⁷

Even a cursory reading of biblical narratives shows that explicit condemnations rarely occur. Yet these stories were recorded to instruct people in godly living. Current controversy surrounding the content of television shows and movies attests to how well-told stories can teach ethics and influence moral development. Rather than assume the lack of explicit evaluation commends an act, we must ask why an explicit "Yea" or "Nay" is rarely given. "Literature enacts rather than states, shows rather than tells. Instead of giving abstract propositions about virtue or vice,

25. Prominent works include: ROBERT ALTER, *THE ART OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE* (1981); TREMPER LONGMAN III, *LITERARY APPROACHES TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION* (1987); MEIR STERNBERG, *THE POETICS OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE: IDEOLOGICAL LITERATURE AND THE DRAMA OF READING* (1985).

26. Some scholars would claim we cannot find the author's meaning, and should instead focus on what a text means to the reader. However, even developers of this perspective like Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamar, place importance on evaluating interpretations. "All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought and direct its gaze 'on the things themselves' (which, in the case of the literary critic, are meaningful texts)." RICHARD L. PRATT, JR. *HE GAVE US STORIES: THE BIBLE STUDENT'S GUIDE TO INTERPRETING OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES 26-27* (1990) (quoting HANS-GEORG GADAMAR, *TRUTH AND MEANING* 236 (1960)).

27. V. PHILIPS LONG, *THE REIGN AND REJECTION OF KING SAUL: A CASE FOR LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL COHERENCE* 20 (1989).

for example, literature presents stories of good or evil characters in action. . . . Literary texts do not come right out and state their themes. They embody them."²⁸ The literary structure of passages helps reveal how authors implicitly make their moral statements.

Biblical stories use a variety of literary conventions to *show* us what they mean rather than *tell* us. The Old Testament in particular uses these methods, "where instead of encountering expository essays, historical treatises, and scientific or theological explanations, we find well-told stories and beautifully constructed poems."²⁹ The Old Testament frequently uses irony, defined as a literary method of making ethical statements by juxtaposing the way things *are* to the way things *ought to be*. The indirect nature of this method and the necessity for interpretation bring certain risks:

[T]he ironist's method forbids his coming right out and saying, 'What you say or think is wrong; here is what is right.' The ironic criticism requires of its hearers and readers the burden of recognition, the discovery of the relation between the ironist's 'is' and his 'ought.' And to use the ironic method is to risk the failure of this recognition, the misunderstanding of the ironist's criticism.³⁰

This is precisely what happened in the opinions of Judges Kaufman and Reinhardt. If they are correct to emphasize only explicit biblical condemnations, the Bible can be read to condone many acts most would regard as unethical. A couple of examples will suffice to show the problem with this interpretive principle. Samson slept with a prostitute, but we are not told he was wrong to do so.³¹ Should Christians similarly feel free to visit prostitutes? When a gang of thugs sought to rape a Levite man, the owner of the house where he was staying offered the Levite's concubine instead, along with his own daughter.³² The gang repeatedly raped the concubine and left her to die outside the host's house. The Levite cut her body into pieces which he sent throughout Israel to mobilize a militia to punish the murderers. Is this then a biblically endorsed response to violent aggressors? Shortly before his suicide, King Saul used a medium to call up the spirit of the deceased Samuel.³³ Samuel was upset at being

28. A COMPLETE LITERARY GUIDE TO THE BIBLE 17 (Leland Ryken & Tremper Longman III eds., Zondervan 1993).

29. Tremper Longman III, *The Literature of the Old Testament*, in A COMPLETE LITERARY GUIDE TO THE BIBLE, *supra* note 28, at 95, 96.

30. EDWIN M. GOOD, IRONY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT 31 (1965).

31. *See Judges* 16:1.

32. *See Judges* 19-20.

33. *See 1 Samuel* 28.

disturbed, but does not say Saul's necromancy was wrong. Is it thereby approved of?

The latter story was not given as the definitive biblical teaching on necromancy. Unlike the issue of suicide, explicit biblical teaching condemns necromancy and similar spiritist practices.³⁴ However, a number of literary devices surrounding the story of Saul's necromancy clearly show that the author did not approve of what happened. In setting the scene for the story the narrator notes that Saul had banned all mediums and psychics from Israel, and the medium even reminds Saul of this!³⁵ These comments explain why Saul disguised himself to visit the medium, but also make an important ethical comment: Saul was now making use of the very thing he had earlier believed immoral. The story also states that Saul did this out of desperation and because of a lack of communication with Yahweh. Without an explicit comment the author uses literary devices to communicate clearly that Saul was using unethical means of obtaining information. This conclusion fits into the larger theme of the books of Samuel which show the down-hill slide of Saul's reign leading to the establishment of David's reign, which we will see is very relevant in analyzing Saul's suicide.

The biblical suicide accounts, similarly examined, reveal much helpful information. These literary clues alone will not lead to an absolutely clear position on the biblical view of suicide. However, as we will now show, in every case it is completely inappropriate to conclude that the accounts condone or approve of suicide. Every account contains enough evidence to cause us to show that the Bible views suicide as the tragic, if not clearly unethical, conclusion to the life of a biblical character portrayed as someone *not* to imitate. When taken in conjunction with other explicit teachings and broad themes in the Bible, these stories supplement the biblical position that suicide and assisted suicide are unethical.

BIBLICAL SUICIDE ACCOUNTS

The book of Judges contains the first two suicide accounts described in the Bible. This book covers an important transitional phase for the nation of Israel between the early leadership of Moses and Joshua and the later kings. The interim rulers were called judges, charismatic military leaders who often freed Israel from invading nations. While some have claimed the book of Judges is a potpourri of stories, recent scholarship views it as a

34. See, e.g., *Deuteronomy* 18:10-14; 1 *Samuel* 15:23.

35. See 1 *Samuel* 28:3, 9.

highly structured narrative unit.³⁶ An organizing central theme in Judges is the gradual worsening of the moral climate in Israel during this period. The author of Judges believed only a king could rectify the situation, as revealed by the refrain repeated four times in the closing chapters: "In those days Israel had no king."³⁷

The stories of the individual judges demonstrate dramatically why this conclusion is justified. The early judges are raised up by God and bring peace to the land for forty or eighty years. After the death of each judge, Israel returns to idolatry and is conquered by a foreign nation, thus necessitating another liberator. However, with the fourth judge, Gideon, things start to get even worse. While his reign begins well, and Israel achieves peace, the people drift away from God earlier than with previous judges. Idolatry returns to the land even before his death.

Gideon is succeeded by his son Abimelech, the first biblical character to commit suicide.³⁸ His reign accelerates the demise of Israel. Rather than being called by God as a judge, he seizes power by conspiracy, killing his seventy half-brothers "on one stone." His reign is never secure, lasting only three years. Abimelech's story reveals a literary structure with a clear theological message. The evil which Abimelech does in the first half of the story befalls him in the second half. As a result of a conspiracy, Abimelech is mortally wounded by a large stone hurled upon him by a woman. At his request, his armor bearer runs him through with his sword. He dies beside the stone that crushed his skull, just as he killed his half-brothers on a stone.³⁹ The account explains that this was God's punishment for his evil.⁴⁰ Abimelech's story is a turning point in Judges. The land has no rest during his dominion, but, more significantly, the enemy is not a foreign army; it is within Israel. There is nothing laudable in Abimelech's actions, neither in his leadership nor in his death.

Four more judges follow Abimelech, with the situation degenerating into civil war under Jephthah. Then comes Samson's story⁴¹, which "is both a tragedy and a heroic folk narrative. The hero is both criticized and celebrated. As a result, most episodes are presented in an ambivalent light, depending on

36. See generally LILLIAN R. KLEIN, *THE TRIUMPH OF IRONY IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES* (1988).

37. See *Judges* 17:6; 18:6; 19:1; 21:25.

38. See *Judges* 9.

39. See T.A. BOOGAART, *Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem*, 32 J. FOR STUDY OLD TESTAMENT 45, 45-56 (1985).

40. See *Judges* 9:23, 56.

41. See *Judges* 13-16.

whether an event is viewed from the perspective of Samson as a tragic figure or a folk hero."⁴² What is clear about Samson, though, is that he never lived up to his spiritual potential. He is yet another stepping stone along Israel's descending path into immorality and idolatry, in spite of God's continued attempts to lead in a different direction.

Samson's birth is foretold in a way the Bible reserves for only pivotal characters.⁴³ He is given amazing strength by God, but ignores His commandments. Israel knows no peace during his reign. At various points he kills numerous Philistines, but some sort of trickery or sexual immorality taints every episode. He dies when he pulls a house down upon himself and thousands of Philistines. Yet his sexual lust and teasing trickery with Delilah were the reason he was captured in the first place. As with any tragic figure, his death is understandable, and even accomplishes good. Yet it is not thereby commended since it was precipitated by his own character weaknesses.

For Christians, Samson is an ambiguous character since the New Testament lists him as an example of someone who lived by faith in God.⁴⁴ Of all the suicides in the Bible, his is unique because it simultaneously led to the destruction of numerous enemies of Israel. As such, it certainly could be viewed more like the sacrificial death of a wartime hero, if not even an instance of martyrdom. However, all Samson's actions are not thereby condoned. Early rabbinical commentary on Samson and the legendary warriors of Israel noted that while the accomplishments of these heroes can be admired, they are not to be emulated. These "dangerous heroes" frequently used their God-given abilities in ways which did not please God.⁴⁵

Samson shows that God can accomplish His purposes *in spite of* His chosen representatives. This is another unifying theme in the book of Judges, and continues into the books of Samuel. Even though humans do not live up to their spiritual potential, or do not live according to God's ways, His will can be accomplished. God remains in control of the situation. Although Samson did not have God's intentions in mind, God used him to judge the Philistines. But it was only through his death that God

42. LELAND RYKEN, *WORDS OF DELIGHT: A LITERARY INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE* 148 (1992).

43. Those receiving a similar announcement are Ishmael, Isaac, John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ. See Victor H. Matthews, *Freedom and Entrapment in the Samson Narrative: A Literary Analysis*, 16 *PERSP. RELIGIOUS STUD.* 246 (1989).

44. See *Hebrews* 11:32.

45. See Richard G. Marks, *Dangerous Hero: Rabbinic Attitudes Toward Legendary Warriors*, 54 *HEBREW UNION C. ANN.* 181 (1983).

started the liberation of Israel. Rather than commending suicide, Samson's death is the tragic conclusion to a life which never bore the fruit it could. As such, it fits the pattern revealed throughout the book of Judges:

From Abimelech's time on, the land does not recover its peace; deliverance is less complete; Jephthah fails where Gideon succeeded in avoiding civil war. If the Samson episode is regarded as part of the central theme—and this is implied by 10:7-9—then at the very end there is lacking something which is normally regarded as basic to this theme; for Samson is a judge in Israel, but he does not effect any real liberation from the foreign enemy.⁴⁶

The book of Judges concludes that a king is needed to bring spiritual, moral, and political stability to Israel. Saul becomes the first king, but not before God warns that Israel's desire for a human king is, in fact, a rejection of God's kingship.⁴⁷ The character traits of the nation's leader become a central theme in the books of Samuel. Rather than listing required character qualities and legislating what the king must be like, in the Bible "the portrayal of character is most often achieved though a variety of implicit, or indirect, means."⁴⁸ A frequently used method in Samuel is to contrast a person with a certain character quality to one without it. According to one scholar, the narrator "is a master of indirect characterization through comparison and contrast."⁴⁹

As the story develops, Saul becomes more and more alienated from God, his family, and his people. Saul brings David into his inner circle, and the narrator uses David's moral character to comment negatively on Saul's. As David becomes more successful, Saul becomes obsessed with jealousy towards him. He makes numerous attempts on David's life, while in contrast, David refuses to kill Saul when two opportunities present themselves. David's respect for the life of the Lord's anointed prevents him from killing the one who unjustly seeks his life. When Saul lies wounded on the battlefield, he has no one to turn to for help because of his earlier decisions. He cannot (or will not) turn to God. Death is the only answer. In a final character contrast, Saul's armor-bearer refuses to help him die, although he imme-

46. J.P.U. Lilley, *A Literary Appreciation of the Book of Judges*, 18 TYNDALE BULL. 94, 98-99 (1967).

47. See 1 *Samuel* 8

48. V. Philips Long, *First and Second Samuel*, in A COMPLETE LITERARY GUIDE TO THE BIBLE, *supra* note 28, at 165, 173.

49. *Id.*

diately thereafter kills himself. Saul is completely isolated. He turns and falls on his own sword. The tragic hero is dead.

Saul's suicide is not an isolated incident without moral comment. It is the tragic conclusion to a literary masterpiece soaked with moral comments. Tragedy implies that what is, ought not to be.⁵⁰ Saul's hunger for control puts him on the battlefield alienated from God, family, and friends. Killing himself fits his frequent use of death to deal with his problems. To claim that Saul's story commends suicide is to misinterpret completely the purpose of tragic narrative. As understandable as his suicide is, it remains a tragic conclusion that should never have happened.

However, the Saul narrative does not end here. David gets news of the battlefield disaster from an Amalekite soldier who claimed Saul persuaded him to assist his suicide because he was in great pain and couldn't live anyway.⁵¹ The differences in these accounts are not explained. David is outraged at the Amalekite since he was not afraid "to kill the Lord's anointed one." Therefore, the Amalekite deserves to die and David has him executed. The structure here both affirms the armor-bearer's refusal to assist Saul's suicide and alludes to the general prohibition against murder: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."⁵²

In condemning the Amalekite, David, a man whose heart was close to God's, implicitly condemned Saul's suicide since by killing himself, Saul thereby killed the Lord's anointed one. In building to the climax of this story, the wrongness of killing the Lord's anointed one is stated five times.⁵³ Repetition is one of the most common literary methods used in Hebrew narrative to stress an important theme. In the middle of this section, an apparently unrelated story is inserted about David setting out to kill Nabal, a man who had refused to help David and his men. Persuaded against killing him, Nabal dies of illness shortly afterwards. David expresses how thankful he is that he did not kill

50. See GOOD, *supra* note 30, at 30-33.

51. See 2 Samuel 1:1-16

52. Genesis 9:6. This, not the Sixth Commandment prohibiting murder, see Exodus 20:13, was the chief biblical passage used by rabbis to prohibit suicide. "Suicide may have been abhorrent to the ancient Hebrews because it exposed the community to the dire consequences of the bloodshed and unattended corpse of one of its members, aspects usually carefully controlled in ritual sacrifice and public execution" See L.D. Hankoff, *Judaic Origins of the Suicide Prohibition*, in SUICIDE: THEORY AND CLINICAL ASPECTS 20 (L.D. Hankoff & Bernice Einsidler eds., 1979)).

53. See 1 Samuel 24:6; 24:10; 26:9; 26:11; 26:23.

Nabal himself, but left matters in God's hands.⁵⁴ David later elaborates that he must allow Saul's death to occur in God's time in God's way.⁵⁵ These incidences declare the importance of leaving death in God's hands, something Saul refused to do.

When the Bible later comments on Saul's death, the literary structure again points to a negative evaluation.⁵⁶ "The repetition of the death motif gives a clue that the Chronicler wanted his readers to focus on the significance of Saul's disgraceful death. . . . The Chronicler intended to teach how Saul's ignominious death demonstrated God's utter rejection of Saul and the exaltation of David's line."⁵⁷ Rather than Saul dying the noble death of a wounded warrior, the biblical perspective is that everything about that fateful battle should be viewed in a negative light.

A similar analysis of all the other suicide accounts reveals a consistent pattern. Nowhere is suicide praised or commended. In fact, the lack of explicit comment on the suicides could just as easily be viewed as a negative evaluation.

The Hebrew Bible has no praise for Saul and his armor-bearer who committed suicide rather than risk capture by the Philistines. Significantly, David's lament for Saul and Jonathan makes no mention of Saul's suicide so as to avoid death at the hands of the Philistines. Saul and Jonathan's bravery come in for due praise, but there is not a word of tribute to the heroism of Saul's death.⁵⁸

In fact, almost all of those who committed suicide are given explicitly negative character evaluations in the Bible.⁵⁹ The only exceptions are Samson, who is ambiguous at best, and Saul's armor-bearer, who plays only an incidental role in the plot. As the Saul narrative reaches its climax, David reminds Saul of an old proverb claiming that evil actions come from evil people.⁶⁰ If the way of life of those who committed suicide is not to be imitated, surely it follows their way of dying should not be imitated either.

54. See 1 Samuel 25:39.

55. See 1 Samuel 26:9-11.

56. See 1 Chronicles 10:1-14.

57. PRATT, *supra* note 27, at 246.

58. ALEX J. GOLDMAN, JUDAISM CONFRONTS CONTEMPORARY ISSUES 260 (1979) (quoting TRUDE WEIS-ROSMARIN, THE JEWISH SPECTATOR (1967)).

59. Abimelech, see Judges 9:56-57, Saul, see 1 Chronicles 10:13-14, Ahithophel, see 2 Samuel 15:31; 17:14, Zimri, see 1 Kings 16:19, and Judas, see Matthew 26:24; John 17:12.

60. See 1 Samuel 24:13

The lives of these anti-heroes must also be contrasted with the lives of biblical heroes. Many great men and women of the Bible (like Rachel, Moses, Elijah, and Paul) reflected on the preferability of death over life.⁶¹ Yet they did not choose to kill themselves. Some of them even prayed that God would kill them, but they accepted his timing. Never did He grant them their request at that time. These characters demonstrate the Bible's view that God is the only one who should determine when we die.

Many of these biblical characters speak openly about the reality of their suffering, yet they turn to God for help in dealing with their pain. Job is held up as the example of patient endurance of suffering.⁶² He experienced horrendous pain, illness, and loss. He wanted to die, but chose not to take his life in his own hands because of his trust in God.⁶³ The language in the latter passage is closely followed by Paul when he reflects on whether life or death is preferable for him.⁶⁴ In coming to his decision, Paul brings up another biblical theme: putting the needs of others before one's own. As much as Paul wanted to be with the Lord, his call to serve others in this world made life "more necessary." Even in suffering and dying, Christians are called upon to find ways to serve others.

In the New Testament, suicide is not explicitly discussed. The suicide of Judas Iscariot is recorded without comment. However, Judas is called a traitor, a devil, a thief, and a son of perdition,⁶⁵ not the sort of character Christians are called to emulate! Self-destructive behavior mentioned in the New Testament is often associated with demon possession.⁶⁶ When Jesus declares he is leaving and that his followers cannot follow him, some Jews ask, "Surely he will not kill himself, will he?"⁶⁷ They could not imagine even their foe committing suicide.

The only other mention of suicide in the New Testament is when a jailer readies to kill himself after finding Paul and Silas' cell-doors open.⁶⁸ Paul persuades the jailer not to commit suicide and offers him salvation instead. The New Testament offers

61. Rebekah, *see Genesis 27:46*, Rachel, *see Genesis 30:1*, Moses, *see Numbers 11:10-15*, Elijah, *see 1 Kings 19:4*, Job, *see Job 6:8-13; 10; 13:14-15*, Jonah, *see Jonah 4:3; 4:8*, and Paul, *see 2 Corinthians 1:8-10; Philippians 1:21-26*.

62. *See James 5:10-11*.

63. *See Job 9:27-28; 10:1; 13:14-15*.

64. *See Philippians 1:21-26; see also Dónal P. O'Mathúna, Did Paul Condone Suicide? Implications for Assisted Suicide and Active Euthanasia, 12 ETHICS & MED. 55, 55-60 (1996)*.

65. *See Luke 6:16; John 6:70-71; 12:6; 17:12*.

66. *See Mark 5:1-5; Luke 9:37-42*.

67. *John 8:22*.

68. *See Acts 16:27*.

a way of life and a set of values which call for hope and contentment in life in spite of pain and suffering. It stresses the value of every individual and the role each can play in this world. It offers a way to live with suffering, knowing that the afterlife will have none. But it also teaches that God's sovereignty extends to people's bodies and their lives. Paul declares to his fellow Christians "You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body."⁶⁹ As we shall now see, the earliest Christians regarded suicide as incompatible with this perspective.

CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM

Christianity has not taught that death should be feared and avoided at all costs. Indeed, a tenacious clinging to life has typically been seen as the result of misplaced priorities for a Christian. Furthermore, a balancing theme is the willingness to die for the good of others or to accept death as a martyr if the only alternative is to deny one's faith. Yet some cases of Jewish and Christian 'martyrdom' seem more like suicides, and probably should be labeled as such.⁷⁰ However, a few scholars would like to use this small number of examples to blur the distinction between martyrdom and suicide, and condone both. Upon these scholars, Judges Kaufman and Reinhardt relied. Hence, an examination of the early church's response to martyrdom is needed.

Christians have reacted to persecution in five different ways: 1) accepting whatever penalties were inflicted, including death; 2) avoiding martyrdom through, for example, bribery or forged documents; 3) fleeing; 4) volunteering for or provoking martyrdom; and 5) apostatizing. The first of these was always approved and the fifth always condemned during the patristic period.⁷¹ The second, third, and fourth were much more problematic and

69. 1 *Corinthians* 6:19-20 (New Living Translation).

70. On Jewish martyrdom, see Gerald J. Bildstein, *Rabbis, Romans, and Martyrdom—Three Views*, 21 *TRADITION* 54 (1984). The numerous issues that make early Christian martyrdom complex are only tangential to our present concerns and, hence, must not detain us here. The literature in this field is continually expanding, but the most authoritative and reliable treatment remains W.H.C. FRENCH, *MARTYRDOM AND PERSECUTION IN THE EARLY CHURCH: A STUDY OF A CONFLICT FROM THE MACCABEES TO DONATUS* (1965). For a significant new perspective on both Jewish and Christian martyrdom, see G.W. BOWERSOCK *MARTYRDOM AND ROME* (1995).

71. Some groups that were peripheral to the orthodox community, e.g. the Gnostics, maintained that apostasy—even a cavalier denial of one's beliefs—was acceptable if death was the alternative. What was said under duress, they maintained, was irrelevant to the condition of one's heart. The

evoked considerable disagreement within the Christian community especially between rigorists and moderates.

The preponderance of known cases of martyrdom that occurred before the legalization of Christianity in 313 are of those who did not actively seek martyrdom but, when arrested, were martyred rather than avoid death through apostasy, bribery, or forged documents. Some, when seeing others being interrogated, tortured, or executed, identified themselves as Christians and suffered the consequences. The latter varied from the theatrically eager to the resigned. Certainly, some actively sought to provoke pagans to martyr them. However, indisputable examples of such are extremely rare. The tiny number of Christians who are recorded as actively taking their own lives did so only under extreme duress. They fall into three categories:

1. Those who killed themselves to avoid excruciating torture. Only one instance appears in the sources.⁷² Augustine's thorough analyses of suicide make no reference to this category in pagan or Christian literature.
2. Those who dramatically ended their lives after being arrested but before being executed. Two examples are recorded.⁷³
3. Virgins and married women who killed themselves to escape defilement. The earliest examples appear to be from the "Great Persecution" (303-311), but were also of concern about a century later when the Goths sacked Rome, raping pagan and Christian women.

Leaving aside these three categories of suicide that arise in the context of persecution or in the face of imminent ravishing by barbarians, we should emphasize that there was considerable disagreement within the Christian community regarding the proper response to persecution. On the one hand, rigorists (a minority in our sources) volunteered for, and sometimes provoked, martyrdom. On the other hand, moderates (a strong majority in our sources) advocated fleeing in the face of persecution. All Christians held that martyrdom was the most perfect display of love toward God and was desired above any other form of death. No other death provided the spiritual glory and rewards that martyrdom guaranteed.

reaction of the orthodox community to such a perspective was unequivocally condemnatory.

72. See EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH FROM CHRIST TO CONSTANTINE* 8.12.2 (G.A. Williamson trans., Penguin Books 1965).

73. See *id.* at 6.41.7, 8.6.6.

Therefore, for rigorists, suicide would be an obstacle to the most cherished form of death, martyrdom. For moderates, the very basis of their condemnation of seeking or provoking martyrdom would *eo ipso* preclude approving of intentionally ending one's own life by one's own hand, much less formulating a theological justification for suicide. Not surprisingly, we do not know of even one instance of Christians committing suicide after being refused martyrdom in all extant literature written before the legalization of Christianity.

PATRISTIC SOURCES ON SUICIDE

In contrast to Judge Reinhardt's assertion, no evidence appears to exist of any Christian during the patristic period committing suicide, in the ordinary sense of the word, to accelerate entrance into heaven. Furthermore, suicide was clearly condemned by church fathers before and contemporary with Augustine (354-430). Some examples will suffice here to show the consistency of this position. Justin Martyr (second century) insisted that suicide opposed the will of God.⁷⁴ "It is not lawful," maintained the anonymous author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* (second century).⁷⁵ Both authors employed a Christianized version of the Platonic argument that suicide is tantamount to desertion from one's divinely assigned post. "Suicides are punished more severely than others," the anonymous *Clementine Homilies* (late second or early third century) asserted.⁷⁶ Clement of Alexandria (ca.155-ca.222) argued that suicide "is not permitted" for Christians.⁷⁷ "[N]othing," according to Lactantius (ca.240-320), "can be more wicked than [suicide]."⁷⁸ Basil of Caesarea (ca.329-379) declared that the sin of abortion is compounded by the dangers of the procedures that render it virtually an act of attempted suicide.⁷⁹ Jerome (ca.345-419) stated categorically that Christ would not receive the soul of a suicide.⁸⁰ "Scripture forbids Christians to lay hands on themselves," averred Augustine's men-

74. See SAINT JUSTIN MARTYR, 2 APOLOGY 4 (Leslie William Barnard trans., Paulist Press 1966).

75. EPISTLE TO DIOGNETUS 6 (Jean Jacques Thierry ed., Leiden, Brill 1964).

76. CLEMENTINE HOMILIES 12.14 (T & T Clark 1870).

77. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, STROMATEIS 6.9 (John Ferguson trans., Catholic University of America Press 1991).

78. LACTANTIUS, DIVINE INSTITUTES 3.18 (Mary Francis McDonald trans., Catholic University of America Press 1964).

79. See BASIL OF CAESAREA, LETTERS 188.2 (Agnes Clare Way trans., Catholic University of America Press 1951).

80. See SAINT JEROME, LETTERS 39.3 (Charles Christopher Mierow trans., Newman Press 1963).

tor, Ambrose (ca.339-397).⁸¹ "God punishes suicides more than homicides," John Chrysostom (349-407) proclaimed, "and we all justly regard them with horror."⁸²

Both Ambrose and Jerome make one exception to their otherwise inclusive condemnation: suicide done to preserve chastity. The small minority of patristic sources prior to Augustine who mention this category of suicide approve of it.⁸³ Augustine's rejection of the probity of suicide to preserve chastity led him to engage in a thorough analysis of suicide in the *City of God* (1:16-28). The first installment of this massive work was published in 414, four years after the Goths captured and ravaged Rome, raping pagan and Christian women alike.

Augustine condemned the following motivations for suicide: 1) because of guilt over past sins; 2) because of a desire for heaven; 3) to avoid or escape from temporal problems; 4) to avoid or escape from another's sinful actions (including doing so to preserve chastity); and 5) to avoid sinning. The only conceivably justifiable cause for suicide, Augustine said, would be the last, yet even the sin of such a well-motivated suicide would be greater than any sin that one might avoid by killing oneself. The basis for his condemnation was fourfold:

1. Scripture does not expressly permit, much less command, suicide as a means of achieving heaven or as a way to escape or avoid evil.
2. A prohibition of suicide is explicit in the sixth commandment ("Thou shalt not kill").
3. Since no private party has the authority to kill a criminal who deserves capital punishment, those who kill themselves are homicides.
4. Suicide allows no opportunity for repentance.

His only reference to martyrdom in this digression on suicide was his refutation of pagan approval of suicide to avoid captivity. He argued that the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles did not commit suicide to escape persecution or martyrdom. About a decade before he published the first installment of the *City of*

81. AMBROSE, CONCERNING VIRGINS 3.7.32 (Mary Melchoir Beyenke trans., Catholic University of America Press 1954).

82. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, COMMENTARY ON GALATIANS 1:4 (J.H. Parker 1848). For more in depth discussion of condemnations of suicide in patristic literature see Darrel W. Amundsen, *Suicide and Early Christian Values, in MEDICINE, SOCIETY, AND FAITH IN THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL WORLDS* 93 (1996).

83. See EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *supra* note 72, at 8.12.3-4, 8.14.14, 8.14.17; JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, HOMILIA ENCOMASTICA, in 49 PATROLOGIA CURSUS COMPLETUS, SERIES LATINA 579-584 (Jacques Paul Migne ed., 1857-66).

God, Augustine addressed martyrdom, but not that of Christians persecuted by pagans. Rather, he condemned the courting of martyrdom by, and the theatrically spectacular suicides of, the Donatists, a schismatic, heretical group.⁸⁴

The Donatist movement began in the early fourth century when rigorists condemned the church's accepting back into fellowship those who had apostatized during the "Great Persecution." Donatists viewed themselves as upholders of the purity of discipline in the face of "compromise with the world." From its beginning, the movement was a thorn in the flesh for the church leadership, resulting in persecution by the church and the imperial government in 317. In 415, the death penalty was enacted for Donatists who continued to assemble. It was especially then, that some Donatists, primarily a fringe group known as the Circumcellions, increased their indiscriminate as well as systematic acts of violence against orthodox Christians (even once attempting to ambush and kill Augustine) and even provoked the authorities to put them to death.

For nearly twenty years, Augustine periodically composed anti-Donatist treatises. A frequent focus of these was the Donatists' attitude toward and practice of suicide, which was sometimes sensationalistic. Space permits only a brief summary of the major themes in his anti-Donatist writings that do not occur in the *City of God*:

1. Provoking martyrdom is a form of suicide and hence a sin.
2. "Heroic" suicide by those who fail to provoke others to martyr them is a sin.
3. The Donatists' suicides violate the foundational Christian principle of patient endurance (presented in one of his last anti-Donatist writings (*Letters* 204) composed in 420).

In 415 Augustine wrote a treatise chiding the Donatists with the example of Job:

At him let those men look who bring death upon themselves when they are being sought out to be given life, and who, by taking away their present life, reject also the life to come. For, if they were being forced to deny Christ or to do anything contrary to justice, they ought, as true martyrs, to bear all things patiently rather than to inflict death upon themselves in their impatience. If he could have

84. On the Donatist movement, see W.H.C. FRENCH, *THE DONATIST CHURCH* (1952).

done it righteously to escape evil, holy Job would have destroyed himself so that he might have escaped such diabolic cruelty in his own possessions, in his own sons, in his own limbs.⁸⁵

Patient endurance will prove to be the climax of Augustine's final statement on the subject of suicide, in book nineteen of the *City of God*, published in 426 or 427.

PATRISTIC SOURCES ON SUFFERING

Patient endurance was not, of course, a theme unique to Augustine. Even a cursory reading of the church fathers shows that they viewed suffering as an indispensable feature of God's sanctifying processes. This conviction, along with an unwavering belief in divine sovereignty, and an equally solid confidence that God does all things for the ultimate good of his people imbued them with a sense of responsibility to practice endurance in the face of all afflictions.

Cyprian (ca.200-258) is an excellent, but not atypical, example. Writing to his fellow Christians while their city was being ravaged by plague, he reminded them that, just like all others, they will suffer illness and adversity. He called his readers to endure with patience. This

endurance the just have always had; this discipline the apostles maintained from the law of the Lord, not to murmur in adversity, but to accept bravely and patiently whatever happens in the world. . . We must not murmur in adversity, beloved brethren, but must patiently and bravely bear with whatever happens.⁸⁶

Hence, "the fear of God and faith ought to make you ready for all things,"⁸⁷ such as sickness and loss of loved ones. "Let not such things be stumbling blocks for you but battles; nor let them weaken or crush the faith of the Christian, but rather let them reveal his valor in the contest, since every injury arising from present evils should be made light of through confidence in the blessings to come. . . Conflict in adversity is the trial of truth."⁸⁸

Cyprian unfailingly stressed the activity of God and the passivity of Christians in death. He averred that Christians who died of the current plague "have been freed from the world by the

85. See AUGUSTINE, LETTERS 13.10, in 16 FATHERS OF THE CHURCH 246 (Catholic University of America Press 1948).

86. CYPRIAN, MORTALITY 8, in 36 FATHERS OF THE CHURCH, *supra* note 85, at 204-05.

87. *Id.* at 207.

88. *Id.* at 207.

summons of the Lord.”⁸⁹ Later he asserted that “those who please God are taken from here earlier and more quickly set free, lest, while they are tarrying too long in this world, they be defiled by contacts with the world.”⁹⁰ He then counseled that “when the day of our own summons comes, without hesitation but with gladness we may come to the Lord at His call.”⁹¹ For “rescued by an earlier departure, you are being freed from ruin and shipwrecks and threatening disasters!”⁹² Hence, “Let us embrace the day which assigns each of us to his dwelling, which on our being rescued from here and released from the snares of the world, restores us to paradise and the kingdom.”⁹³ He encouraged them to contemplate their loved ones, who were already in heaven, and the bliss that was treasured up for them there. “To these, beloved brethren, let us hasten with eager longing! Let us pray that it may befall us speedily to be with them, speedily to come to Christ.”⁹⁴

It is God who summons Christians home. God removes them from the world; God liberates them; God delivers them; God rescues them; God brings them to heaven. Christians are passive—they are being liberated; they are being delivered; they are being rescued; they are being brought. It is God who is the active party. Christians are to yearn for heaven and to pray for an early departure from life. Yearning for death and praying to die are categorically different from taking one’s own life. There is no place for suicide here. Patient endurance of all tribulation, steadfastness to the end, final submission to God’s will under those very afflictions that God is using to refine and perfect the Christian: such faith is antithetical to suicide. And such faith permeates patristic literature.

There is no evidence that before Augustine’s time suicide stimulated controversy within the Christian community. Martyrdom, however, did. As we have seen, the probity of provoking or volunteering for martyrdom was hotly disputed before the legalization of Christianity. Why did suicide not stimulate controversy within the Christian community? Surely not because the church fathers were reluctant to condemn sin and to confront their fellow Christians for their moral failings. The absence of controversy regarding suicide does not suggest that Christians were indifferent to suicide as an ethical issue. It simply appears not to

89. *Id.* at 208.

90. *Id.* at 215.

91. *Id.* at 215.

92. *Id.* at 220.

93. *Id.* at 220.

94. *Id.* at 221.

have been a sufficiently attractive and viable option for them to have regarded it as a threat to the moral integrity of the Christian community.

The condemnations of suicide that we encounter prior to Augustine's time are comparatively rare because they are not part of Christians' broad moral indignation against pagan depravity. Their outrage, especially against abortion and infanticide, was greatly stimulated by the perceived helplessness of the victim, whether a fetus or an infant. Their outrage was also directed at gladiatorial combat and viciously cruel forms of torture and execution. Even acts of sexual immorality were more severely condemned when slaves were forced to be the objects of their owners' lusts or their greed when forced into prostitution for their owners' profit. The moral indignation of Christian authors was especially provoked by the helplessness of the victims of others' sins. Suicide, as practiced by pagans, simply did not arouse passionate condemnation, for it was not an act in which an innocent party was victimized.

CONCLUSION

Early Christians lived in a secular milieu in which suicide by the ill was frequently practiced and its probity seldom questioned. Yet patristic literature has no record of ill Christians committing suicide or asking others' assistance to do so. Neither do we have records of people requesting others to kill them to escape the grinding tedium of chronic illness or the severe suffering of terminal illness. Christianity introduced moral obligations that were altogether foreign to the Greek and Roman ethos. One of these was a duty to care—not a duty to cure, but a duty to care—an obligation to extend practical compassion to the destitute, the widow, the orphan, and the sick. This introduced a truly radical transformation in attitudes toward the sick.

Patristic literature addresses only three ethical issues raised by illness: the tendency of some Christians to seek medical care without first pondering the spiritual dimensions of their suffering; the use of pagan or magical healing alternatives; and the occasionally frantic struggles to find and cling to even meager hope of recovery. There is not a scintilla of evidence that the preferential position that Christianity gave to the sick included an expedited "final exit."

While the Bible does not explicitly condemn suicide, it nowhere explicitly condones it either. Those whose suicides are recorded in the Bible are clearly presented as characters not to be emulated. Their suicides may be understandable, but they are

narratively structured as yet another in a series of wrong decisions made by unethical characters.

Suicide and assisted suicide are incompatible with a number of biblical teachings. So foundational are the goodness of God and his sovereignty in patristic theology, and patient endurance of affliction so stressed as an essential Christian virtue, that we should not be surprised that patristic texts are void of any reference to suicide by the ill. Scripture and early church history do not condone suicide or assisted suicide. They should not be distorted to provide support for the legalization of physician-assisted suicide.