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Ovid on Abortion in the Roman Empire

Although large families were typical in Jewish Palestine, low birth rates were more common in the Roman world, especially among the middle and upper classes. In some cases, the government actually took measures to increase population: bachelors might have to pay a tax or various concessions might be granted to parents who had three or more children.

Abortion was fairly common but not approved; that is, regardless of legality, it was a social disgrace. Women took responsibility for obtaining the procedure and, frequently, performed it on themselves with predictable results:

Ah, women, why will you thrust and pierce with the instrument, and give dire poisons to your children yet unborn? This neither the tigress has done in the jungles of Armenia, nor has the lioness had the heart to destroy her unborn young; Yet tender woman does it—but not unpunished—; oft she who slays her own in her bosom dies herself. She dies herself, and is borne to the pyre with hair unloosed, and all who behold cry out: “Tis her desert!” (Ovid, *Amores* 2.14.27–38 [ca. 16 BCE])

Ovid, *Heroides and Amores*, trans. Grant Showerman (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1921).