

Leviticus 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 16 April 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 12. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days, as at the time of her menstruation she shall be unclean, and on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying.

She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation, and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days. And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtle dove for a sin offering, and he shall offer it before the Lord and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female. And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtle doves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering, and the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean. Leviticus chapter 12 is a chapter that raises many questions. First of all, what is it doing at this particular point in the book? Why does childbirth, something that seems to be a positive thing, render the woman unclean? Why the distinction between the purification period for female and male children? And what is the purpose of the sacrifice? The first question, what the commandment is doing here, is answered in part by consideration of the pattern of Genesis that has been playing out in the chapters following the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. In Genesis chapter 3, after the fall, there are a series of judgments, first upon the serpent, then upon the woman, and then upon the man. And the same sort of order is followed here. Leviticus chapter 11 was concerned with unclean animals, and particularly emphasized their connection with the curse-bearing earth. Unclean animals are in some way or other similar to the serpent. After the judgment upon the serpent in Genesis chapter 3, the Lord addressed the woman, and her judgment concerned the pains of childbearing. In Leviticus, in a similar pattern, after dealing with unclean animals, the Lord addresses the woman and childbirth in chapter 12.

Why then might childbirth render the woman unclean? This text is a troubling one for many readers. It suggests that there is an underlying misogyny in the biblical text, that women are somehow seen as defiled and defiling. However, before jumping to conclusions, we should consider the text more carefully. The law here is explicitly connected to the law concerning the uncleanness of menstruation.

We see a rationale for that commandment in Leviticus chapter 20 verse 18. If a man lies with a woman during her menstrual period and uncovers her nakedness, he has made naked her fountain, and she has uncovered the fountain of her blood. Both of them shall be cut off from among their people. Blood as such does not seem to render people unclean. If someone accidentally cut themselves while working and was bleeding, they weren't unclean on that account. The defiling character of blood seem to relate more to cases of unjust shedding of blood, the prohibited eating of blood, or relations with a menstrual woman. In all of these cases, there is some form of trespass, some attempt to take life or sacrilegious violation of it. Leviticus chapter 20 verse 18 suggests that some sort of inappropriate uncovering has occurred. He has made naked her fountain. The same word as translated as fountain in chapter 20 is translated as flow in verse 7 of our chapter. In the biblical literature, the woman is often connected with or associated with springs, wells, and fountains. Many of the great women of Genesis and Exodus, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel, Zipporah, Miriam, were associated with wells or springs. Sexual relations are compared to drinking water from wells and fountains in Proverbs chapter 5 verses 15 to 19. Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets, let them be for yourself alone and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely dear, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight, be intoxicated always in her love. In Song of Songs, the beloved compares the bride to a sealed garden fountain, albeit using a different word. The life is in the blood, and the menstrual blood of the woman is most especially associated with life, connected with the mysterious powers of her fertility. On account of the power of female fertility, the substances associated with it need to be handled with particular care. The woman whose fountain has been exposed, either through regular menstruation or through childbirth, is taboo. David Bialy argues that the menstrual woman is similar to the Nazarite, set apart for a period, and required to separate themselves from various things. He writes, if menstrual blood like semen was thought of as a procreative fluid, then it too had to be separated from cultic activity, and intercourse during a woman's menstrual period might produce a double impurity, the impurity of normal intercourse, plus the impurity of contact with menstrual blood. The source of the blood is what must remain hidden, as it apparently is when she is not menstruating, even during intercourse. Menstrual bleeding by itself indicates that the source has been breached, but it takes an act of intercourse to fully reveal it. What is clear is that intercourse during the menses causes both partners to reveal, or come into contact with, the source of female fertility. Mark Garcia remarks that the fixed periods of impurity do not seem to correspond to the variable duration of the actual menstrual period, or a postpartum discharge. He suggests that the actual menstruation or discharge is treated more as a surface manifestation of the deeper reality of the woman's life-giving fertility, which is a reality like the life-bearing blood, which is subject to a strict taboo, so that it cannot be trespassed upon.

The blood of the menstrual woman can be polluting because, on account of its connection with the power of natural fertility, it has the potential to violate the realm of the sacred when the woman's fountain is uncovered. In contrast to many other societies, Israel's worship was not a fertility cult, and the natural powers and substances of sexuality and fertility, while respected, were never sacralised. A crucial aspect of the picture is that the woman's fertility involved the generative powers of the flesh, and hence is associated with sin and death after the fall, polluting on account of the impurity of flesh itself. Sex and childbirth are good, but in them the defiled reality of sinful flesh is most powerfully exposed, because its creative powers are most in evidence.

[7 : 10] In all of this, we should think back to Genesis chapter 3 and the judgment upon the woman. To the woman he said, I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing. In pain you shall bring forth children.

Childbearing may be one of the greatest blessings and the most remarkable powers enjoyed by human beings, but after the fall it is especially exposed to judgment. Nakedness and exposure of our sinful flesh is now subject to shame on account of our corruption.

Garcia also considers the associations of the numbers 7 and 40, highlighting possible connections with the stories of creation and flood. In both of those cases, the watery womb from which the world was brought forth is exposed, first in the watery deep at the beginning of the seven days of creation, and second at the beginning of the 40 days of the floodwaters rising in Genesis chapter 7 verse 11, when the fountains of the deep burst open.

The woman would probably have had full access to the common domestic realm again after the 7th or the 14th day, but would not have had access to the sacred realm, in the celebration of peace offerings for instance, until the 40th or 80th.

Why the distinction then between the sexes? Why the longer purification period for girls? The answer, it seems to me, is found in circumcision. The newborn infant and its mother are bound together as a pair, and not merely symbolically.

[8 : 33] The infant, in the earliest period after birth, is dependent upon and frequently attached to the body of its mother. If the significance of the flesh is particularly concentrated in the woman's powers of fertility, exposed during menstruation and after childbirth, In men, the powers of the flesh are particularly symbolically concentrated in the genitals.

Circumcision is the cutting off of the flesh in the site where it is symbolically focused. As the flesh is cut off there for the male child, the polluting power of the impure flesh born by the pair is then halved.

After the period of her purification is complete, the woman has to offer a sacrifice. The sacrifice is the same irrespective of whether the child was male or female, although provision is made for poorer persons.

The purification offering would deal with the heightened exposure of the corruption of fallen flesh in childbirth, and with the ascension offering, would have reincorporated the woman into the worshipping community.

The laws concerning menstruation and childbirth paint a complicated picture of the great power and goodness of women's fertility, and the necessity of treating it with honour and not violating it, while also underlining the truth that our flesh, for all of its creational goodness, is now corrupt, subject to death, and consequently defiling.

[9 : 51] We read of the performance of this sacrifice in Luke chapter 2 verses 21 to 24, And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord, every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord, and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

From a knowledge of Leviticus chapter 12, we can recognise that Mary and Joseph must have been poorer. A question to consider, how might an understanding of the presence of the flesh at the heart of human virility and fertility help us to think more properly about these things?