

Cleanliness and Childbirth

Leviticus 12:1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

² "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.

³ And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ "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 turtledove for a sin offering,

⁷ 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.

⁸ And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves 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."

(Lev 12:1-8)

Where We You When I Built My House?

Mary Douglas begins her treatment of Leviticus 12-15 with a fascinating quote from Job¹ which she does not comment upon, but rather just leaves there like hanging ripe fruit tempting you to pick and chew upon:

8 Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from
the womb,
9 when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its
swaddling band,
10 and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors,
11 and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and
here shall your proud waves be stayed?”

(Job 38:8-11)

The setting is creation, Genesis 1. The object of creation is the sea. The imagery is spectacular. It is “bursting forth.” I have no idea what happened, because I wasn’t there, but I imagine some kind of Texas-sized geyser like Old Faithful at the deepest basin of what would become miles deep oceans that fill up with water when the enormous fountain

¹ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 176.

explodes. There are **two analogies** that are used to describe the eruption of water.

One is the **temple**. You might read “**bars and doors**” and think of a jail or something. But in this entire chapter, God is “**laying the foundation**” (**Job 38:4**), “**determining its measurements,**” “**stretching its line**” (**5**), **sinking its bases** and **laying its cornerstone** (**6**). This is the language used of **Solomon’s temple** (**1Kg 7; 2Ch 3-4**), of **Ezekiel’s new temple** (**Ezek 40-48**); of **Paul’s church-temple** (**1 Cor 3; Eph 2**); and of the **temple in Revelation** (**Rev 11; 21**). So the sea is barred from the temple.

The other analogy is **giving birth**. The sea is “**bursting out from the womb.**” The earth is viewed as pregnant and the waters are bursting out of her like a crying baby eager to take its first breath in the light of day. The clouds are given to the sea as “**its garment**” and the thick darkness is “**its swaddling band.**” God is wrapping the sea up tight after the birthing is complete.

Combined, the imagery is of a newborn **not being allowed to enter the sanctuary**. You see, the sea is chaotic like an infant. This chaos is the world outside the organized religious haven. The bars and doors keep it from passing

onto the dry land, thereby destroying (or profaning) the temple God that God makes “his footstool” (Isa 66:1).

This is a fascinating way to begin thinking about several chapters from Leviticus that deal with **reproductions** and **eruptions**. Indeed, like Leviticus 11 with its reproduction and eruption of life and the teeming creatures on land, water, sea which reminded us of Genesis, these chapters continue to set forth Israel’s law-code via a theology that connects us back to the Genesis creation and the Eden-temple to help make sense of what might otherwise seem like random or meaningless or even Victorian prudish antiquated laws.

Context: Continuing Genesis Theology

We have seen a **logical flow of thought** in the way the laws of Leviticus are laid out. The first seven chapters dealt with the sacrifices that go on in the courtyard. The next three chapters described the ordination of the priests before the screen of the Holy Place, with ch. 10 warning us what happens when someone goes through that screen in a way not commanded by God. **Chs. 11-15** describe **various**

unclean things that still deal with people entering courtyard space.

In thinking about these five chapters together, it is perhaps important to point out, as one scholar has, that they “are perhaps the least attractive in the whole Bible. To the modern reader there is much in them that is meaningless or repulsive. They are concerned with ritual ‘uncleanness’ in respect of animals (11), of childbirth (12), skin diseases and stained garments (13), of the rites for the purgation of skin diseases (14), of leprosy and of various issues or secretions of the human body (15). Of what interest can such subjects be ... What can all this have to do with religion?”² I think he has understated his point by using language that is sanitized. When I read these chapters, I’m struck by things that people in good company do not talk about. This is not watercooler office-talk stuff, not family dinner table stuff. Strictly speaking, chs. 12-15 are “the only medical topics in the book.”³ I basically hate doctor shows. They gross me out. So I can relate to this quote.

² Nathaniel Micklem, *The Interpreter's Bible, II, Leviticus* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1953), quoted in Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 46.

³ Douglas, 179.

Nevertheless, they have much to do with religion, and I have a duty to explain it to you and help you see how it is relevant today. So let's gain some perspective of how to approach Leviticus 12. First, recall the previous chapter which began this "clean and unclean" unit. It discussed the clean and unclean **animals** of **Genesis 1**. The unclean were *ceremonially* unclean and not *morally* evil, though there were animals that deliberately reminded us of the **Satanic attack on our first parents** (**Gen 3**), with birds associated with demons and creeping things that go on their bellies making us think of the Devil.

Israel was **not to eat** of them, harkening back to the first command **not to eat** of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (**Gen 2**), but rather, they were to **make a distinction** between the clean and unclean, like Adam who was supposed to **discern** "good and evil." They were also **not to touch dead** animal carcasses lest they be cast out of the presence of God. This takes us to the language of Eve who thought she could not "**touch**" the fruit, and after they ate, God told them they would **die**, and they were **cast out** of the Garden-Temple **away from the presence of God**, yet God clothed them with the **skins of the sacrificial animal** in an act of his grace.

Though ch. 12 connects with 11 through the idea of life,⁴ chapters 12-15 should be considered a smaller unit. They move us from unclean animals to **unclean people** and two things associated with them. As far as the people go, it goes from **women (12)**, to **both (13-14)**, then **men (15:1-17)**, to **both (15:18)**, then back to **women (19-28)**. This creates a chiasm, which Mary Douglas calls “**Leviticus’ favourite literary form.**”⁵

A. Women (Lev 12)

B. Men and Women (Lev 13-14)

C. Men (Lev 15:1-17)

B¹. Men and Women (Lev 15:18)

A¹. Women (Lev 15:19-28)

Conclusion: (Lev 15:29-33)

In each case, the uncleanness **keeps one from approaching** near to God in his tabernacle. This is telegraphed in a couple of ways. First, in each case, when they come to the end of the prescribed time of uncleanness, they become clean through a **burnt offering** and an **offering of atonement** (**Lev 12:7-8; 14:18-21, 29-31, 53; 15:15, 30**)

⁴ The word “*zara*” (gives birth) is used in Gen 1:11-12.

⁵ Douglas, *Leviticus*, 177. She has her own chiasms for this passage; this one is my own.

which make them whole and fit to come into God's presence again. Of course, these offerings are the heart of the tabernacle ground that they were allowed to walk upon.

Second, the laws that deal with men and women regarding bodily discharges form their own literary (ABAB) pattern which puts the emphasis squarely upon the “**things**” that are associated with the people: the pure **body**, **clothing**, and the “**house**,” all three of which are vital to the language of the tabernacle/temple motif.⁶

A. Disease of a **body**, diagnosis (13:1-46)

B. Disease of a **garment**, diagnosis (13:47-59)

A¹. Disease of a **body**, declaring clean and atonement (14:1-32)

B¹. Disease of a **house**, diagnosis and cleansing atonement (14:33- 57)

And so, this section of the book's laws continues having us think about the courtyard in the tabernacle area.

Though atonement is made for the people in these chapters, very importantly, it is never for moral reasons here, like it was with Adam and Eve when God covered them. This is seen clearly when you see that atonement is also made for the house (**Lev 14:53**). **The atonement is**

⁶ “When body, garment, and house are found in a carefully constructed set of rules, we have been warned. It signals a return to the body/temple microcosm.” Douglas, *Leviticus*, *ibid*.

ceremonial. The issue is about natural things that cause a person to be unfit to be in God's presence. We've seen the remedies when they were unfit in the sacrifices at the beginning of the book, depending upon the issue involved. Now it will begin to discuss some of the things that actually make them unwhole.

As we get into this *today and in the coming weeks*, I'm going to talk about the issue of "*wholeness*." In each case, something is happening that causes the person to be considered *unwhole*, that is deficient in some way that causes them to be ceremonially *unholy*. Curiously, in these chapters, wholeness is bound together by the idea of *reproduction* and its opposite, *death* (also Ch. 11), especially death as it is expressed in the birth-death cycle that comprises our mortality.⁷ It is this unwholness reflected in our mortality that is diametrically opposed to the holiness and life of God.⁸ That is something you should be looking out for throughout these chapters as you think of its relevance today. God is whole. You are not. God is Life. You are dying. These laws teach you to distinguish the

⁷ Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 49; cf. 31–32, 48, 50, 207–8. Cited in Gane, 226–27.

⁸ Gane, 227.

Clean and the unclean so that you can better understand both God and yourself in relation to him.

Finally, for our passage today, through the topic of reproduction we are especially reminded of **Gen 4:1** and the opening of the **Cain and Abel** story. “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.’ And again, she bore his brother Abel.”⁹

Uncleanness in Childbirth: The Blood of Her Purification

Turning now to Leviticus 12. We begin with the now common introduction. “The LORD spoke to Moses” (**Lev 12:1**) or “The Memra [Word] of the LORD spoke to Moses saying” (Targum). It is worth remembering that whoever put Leviticus into its final form, arranging it so carefully (be that Moses or Ezra or someone else), insists that these are in fact the words of Yahweh. They are not Moses’ words,

⁹ Again, **Douglas** writes, “At first glance it is difficult to see what leprosy has to do with reproduction. But when Leviticus frames one case of impurity within another, the system of extended exemplification makes the meaning transparent ... The text of chapter 13 uses swelling, spreading, and erupting as diagnostic for the sickness in question. The RSV translation uses ‘eruption’ ... the same word also means blossom ... The emphasis on an eruptive condition as diagnostic of leprosy reintroduces the idea of teeming fecundity [fertility, fruitfulness, abundancy], but in this chapter blossoming and erupting are morbid” (*Leviticus*, 178, 184, 185).

much less would they be some later priest of Israel's words made up a millennium after Moses lived. Any interpretation that does not take this seriously at any point can be considered faithful to the biblical text.

Christ then tells Moses, “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child...” (Lev 12:2a). Things surrounding childbirth are now going to be the point of law. Childbirth is the most obvious point of contact with reproduction that you can get. It is also fundamental to what it means to be a woman and to the original design God gave the first couple in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply.” And so again, Genesis 1-3 is in the background. What will this law specifically discuss about childbirth?

The answer is the uncleanness that comes from it. “... then she shall be unclean” (12:1). You might say, uncleanness? For childbirth? I thought God created women to give birth? Wouldn't that be a good thing rather than an unclean thing? If you are asking this question, you have already misunderstood what I said earlier. This uncleanness is *not a moral issue*. The woman has done

nothing wrong.¹⁰ This is not good vs. evil, but clean vs. unclean.

But, you might think, as many have in earlier times, that the woman is unclean **because of the baby**. This option is tempting, because it clearly links the unclean state to giving birth. Most of those who have taken this view link this to **original sin**. Calvin is representative saying that,

There is little difficulty in understanding why a woman who has conceived and given birth to a child, should be pronounced unclean; viz., because the whole race of Adam is polluted and defiled, so that the woman already contracts uncleanness from the offspring which she bears in the womb, and is further contaminated by giving it birth ... The mother would not be unclean if the children were pure and free from all defilement.¹¹

¹⁰ Contra the Jews, who came up with all kinds of possible sins the mother must have committed (see **John Gill** on Lev 12:6).

¹¹ **John Calvin**, Comments on Lev 12:2 in John Calvin and Charles William Bingham, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 499. John Gill has a fascinating discussion where he seems to be know in his heart of hearts that the issue isn't about sin, and yet he can't let go of that idea. So rather than blame the woman or the child, he turns it all on Eve. This law, he says, "Has respect not so much to any particular sin of her's, as of her first parent Eve, who was first in the transgression; and on account of which transgression pains are endured by every child-bearing woman; and who also conceives in sin, and is the instrument of propagating the corruption of nature to her offspring; and therefore was to bring a sin-offering typical of the sin-offering Christ is made to take away that, and all other sin; whereby she shall be saved, even in child-bearing, and that by the birth of a child, the child Jesus, if she continues in faith,

There are several problems with this. **First**, the text doesn't say she is unclean because of the baby, only that when she has a baby, she is unclean. Those are not necessarily the same thing. In fact, it directly links the uncleanness to the blood-flow saying, "...as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean" (12:2). The menstruation laws come in ch. 15, but what is similar in both instances is the bloody discharge that happens. This is made clearer in vs. 4. "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" (Lev 12:4). In menstruation, there are no babies involved. The situations are directly analogous "as (*ki*) at the time." This puts the focus on the discharge, not the baby.

Second, it nowhere says that the baby is unclean, only that the woman is.¹²

and charity, and holiness, with sobriety, 1 Tim. 2:15 these offerings were to be brought *unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, unto the priest; to offer them up for her.*" See **John Gill**, *An Exposition of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, The Baptist Commentary Series (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 597. Besides presupposing that sin is involved, this unique take has an interesting translation (or interpretation?) of the phrase "through childbearing" in 1 Timothy 2:15, a very strange passage that would possibly make more sense if it were connected to this law in the way Gill has here. Alas, "even in" is just not a good translation of the Greek here.

¹² **Matthew Thiessen**, "Luke 2:22, Leviticus 12, and Parturient Impurity," *Novum Testamentum* 54 (2012): 16-29,

Third, if this were true then, as we will see later, Jesus would himself be the cause of Mary's uncleanness! But this is impossible. Though I do accept with Matthew Henry that this uncleanness may "signify the pollution of sin which we are all conceived and born in, Ps 51:1,"¹³ there has to be another reason for the uncleanness.

That reason is, as Henry says, *ceremonial*. It deals with approaching God in his sanctuary. In fact, it may also be very practical, as strange as that sounds. Even though pain is now involved because of sin, giving birth is still a very good thing (Ps 128:3; Gen 24:60; etc.), and there is nothing in Leviticus 12 that undermines this. In fact, it can be argued that this law actually helps reinforce that. How?

The uncleanness actually has the benefit of helping the mother by not allowing her to leave her house and to be alone with her baby for a specific period of time until her

https://www.academia.edu/1327821/Luke_2_22_Leviticus_12_and_Parturient_Impurity, argues that in fact Leviticus simply presupposes that the infant is unclean, however not for sinful reasons, only for ceremonial reasons. Even though it would make him unclean, this would not necessarily hurt the doctrine of Christ's sinlessness. It would depend upon *why* the baby is unclean. Is it because of its own inherent sinfulness, because it touches the woman's uncleanness, or something else? However, he admits that not all Jews believed Lev 12 presupposed this. It should also be noted that his argument gives scant to no biblical support, only Jewish and pagan tradition on babies also being unclean.

¹³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994], 164).

uncleanliness is over. This protects them both,¹⁴ nourishes the child, helps the mother recuperate, encourages their bonding, and places a high regard on both lives.¹⁵ One commentator sums it up saying, “This entire chapter, brief as it is, shows God’s loving concern for the family, especially mother and child.”¹⁶

As far as ceremony is concerned, or religion, or understanding what God is like, the text has singled out the problem of her “blood of purifying.” Why should this blood make her unclean? There are a couple of reasons for this. First, you should know that it isn’t the shedding of all blood on any occasion that makes someone unclean. If you get a bloody nose or cut your finger, there is no law that says you are unclean. So, the blood here is being attached to something specific—that which happens to a woman, either on a monthly basis or when the baby is born. Let’s stick here with when a baby is born.

¹⁴ In this part of the discussion, many will bring up how ancient people’s viewed demons as particularly dangerous to women and children at the time of childbirth. But they rightly note that there are no demons evident in the text. See more below.

¹⁵ This is all discussed in Margaret L. Hammer, *Giving Birth: Reclaiming Biblical Metaphor for Pastoral Practice* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 36-39. https://books.google.com/books?id=S_-ex9atOZAC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Holy*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 54.

During birthing, lots of blood leaves the mother. This is also mingled with the other fluids that were all feeding and nourishing the baby in the womb. Quoting Heiser, “To the Israelite mind, this is a loss of whatever liquids there are that are important for producing and sustaining life.”¹⁷ Remember, and we have seen this before in the sacrifices, *the blood is the life* (Lev 17:11; Dt 12:23).

The idea then is that the loss of that which the life-giver gave for the life of another therefore makes her unwhole. She has lost some of the life. I’m reminded of *The Princess Bride* and the six-fingered man, Count Rungen, in the Pit of Despair having taken half of his lifetime to create “The Machine.” When the hero Westley is chained to a table and the machine starts its suction pump on only the lowest level, the Count says, “I’ve just sucked one year of your life away.” The mother probably doesn’t have time taken away from her life (though in child-birth right up to the 20th century, death was a very real possibility during and after, and on rare occasions even in first-world countries women still bleed out), but that which gave life to another is now leaving her, and it only comes back, or she is only made whole again after the time of her body purifying itself.

¹⁷ Michael S. Heiser, *Notes on Leviticus*, Leviticus 12.

This wholeness is **physical** (rather than moral) wholeness. Douglas says,

Much of Leviticus is taken up with stating the **physical perfection** that is required of things presented in the temple and of persons approaching it. The animals offered in sacrifice must be without blemish, women must be purified after childbirth, lepers should be separated and ritually cleansed before being allowed to approach it once they are cured. All bodily discharges are defiling and disqualify from approach to the temple. Priests may only come into contact with death when their own close kin die. But the high priest must never have contact with death.¹⁸

We are going to **see this a lot more in Leviticus**. But it is important on several counts.

First, think again about how close **death** was in earlier times to a woman giving birth. Many babies and women died. Giving birth was often a harrowing experience, both for her and for those who loved her. Levine writes, “**Although the new mother was a source of joy to the community and her new child a blessing, she generated**

¹⁸ **Mary Douglas**, *Purity and Danger*, 52.

anxiety as did all aspects of fertility and reproduction in ancient society.”¹⁹ Because of this, he says, declaring the mother impure was a way of protecting and sheltering her. People would keep watch over her more during her period of impurity because she was isolated. They would not let her do things that were forbidden. It is hard to imagine a culture like that in our egalitarian society that refuses to treat women as special and dignified any longer (ironic, isn't it?). The church needs to recapture this way of thinking highly of women and babies and childbirth again.

Second, here uncleanness will be contagious to anything she touches. This is not dangerous to common things, but “she shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed” (4). This leads to another point.

Third, it teaches you about the perfection and wholeness of God. God can only be approached by those who are themselves whole. All of this is typological, of course. It illustrates a point until the time of completion and wholeness is finally made available to all.

If the idea of life, death, and bloody loss is a first reason she would be unclean, as **second** is the event itself. Getting

¹⁹ Levine, *Leviticus*, 249.

pregnant and having babies is everywhere in the Bible viewed as a mingling of divine and human activity. Specifically, God opens the womb. The woman gives birth. Both seem denied by many people today. God is viewed as almost an afterthought in the whole enterprise, especially with the rise of modern medicine and technologies. As for the women, I recently came across a very good article on women's ordination where the author began,

God is not fair. He deprives men of the most profound and satisfying experience imaginable. Both men and women participate in the creation of another human being, but only women get to carry that little human being inside their body for nine months, nourishing that baby with sustenance from their own body. Only women get to bring that precious child into the world. In many cases, that child will have a more intimate relationship with its mother than with anyone else in the world.²⁰

This week, Jon Caldara, long time opinion columnist for *The Denver Post*, was fired because the newspaper would not

²⁰ Gerald McDermott, "God is Not Fair: Some Thoughts on Women's Ordination," *Anglican Pastor* (Jan 20, 2020), <https://anglicanpastor.com/god-is-not-fair-some-thoughts-on-womens-ordination/>.

tolerate his insistence that “there are only two sexes.”²¹ This shows the insanity that now permeates big corporate life in America as they repudiate obvious biological truths like that of the previous quotation in their sheer denial of objective reality. Such is the world we live in where nearly everything about the subject is ignored or denied, even having headlines like “Transgender Man Gives Birth to Non-Binary Partner’s Baby with Female Sperm Donor.”²² You can’t make this stuff up. We are living in a Salvador Dali painting. Our culture has become an episode of the *The Twilight Zone*. It must not be this way with Christians.

Back to the point. In **Genesis 4:1**, we actually have the two coming together in that it tells us that Eve gave birth “with the help of the LORD.” It seems to me that this can only mean that the Angel of the LORD acted as the midwife, though it probably also can mean that God protected her through the painful ordeal. Either way or both ways, the human-divine connection is obvious.

²¹ **Valerie Richardson**, “Denver Post Columnist Accuses Newspaper of Firing Him for Insisting ‘There are Only Two Sexes,’” *Washington Times* (Jan 18, 2020), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/18/fired-denver-post-columnist-says-he-was-canned-ins/?fbclid=IwAR3zVIZ-Vh3IPo2CY0vOjOJCBllzsB7-BK0Ore27TVzo8pxVyKTHJCNw4c>.

²² **Helen Whitehouse**, “Transgender Man Gives Birth to Non-Binary Partner’s Baby with Female Sperm Donor,” *Mirror* (Dec 28, 2019), <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/transgender-man-gives-birth-non-21177808>.

So now, think about this subject from the point of view of **mingling** the two spheres. Because both God and woman are involved in the event, the separateness of the heavenly and earthly come to what is the equivalent of a **beach** or **sunset** where you are neither on land nor sea, it is neither day nor night but a “between” thing. What exactly is giving birth? A natural activity, a supernatural one? Giving birth is among the most profoundly sacred things that happen in the profane (common) arena of life. Her spilling of blood is equivalent in the Torah to the work of a **warrior in holy war** who is called upon to spill the blood of his enemy to purge the land or the people. In fact, in tribal societies, “**a woman in childbirth was treated with the same respect as a man in battle ... there was a metaphysical equation between the two acts.**”²³

Both of these acts require the wholeness of the one partaking in it. For the warrior, his wholeness, cleanness, separateness must be before he goes into battle (**Dt 23:9-14**). For the mother, it must be after she has given birth. Both are akin to the priest who must be physically whole and pure to do his bloody work of sacrifice (**Lev 21:17-20**). This is because all three are engaging in activities that mingle the

²³ **Hammer** (p. 43 n. 31) cites Goldsmith, *Childbirth Wisdom*, 86.

divine and human realms. You must learn to think about pregnancy and childbirth as sacred things and not give into the secularism and strips them of their profound meaning.

7+33=40; 14+66=80

That's why childbirth makes her unclean. So let's return to the discussion of the male child. Here we come to perhaps the most perplexing part of the chapter. It tells us that if she gives birth to a male, she will be unclean for seven days (Lev 12:2). It explains this because "on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised" (3). This is in accordance with the law of circumcision given to Abraham. So, the idea seems to be that the mother will be considered clean so that she can attend that ceremony, a ceremony which itself is a bloody rite of setting apart. However, she is to return home and will "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" (4). This gives us a total of 40 days of uncleanness, a nice biblical number that symbolizes probation, trial, and chastisement.²⁴ It is associated with Noah's flood, Moses on

²⁴ E. W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1967), 266.

the Mountain, Israel in the wilderness, several of the judges who deliver after that period, the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, and Jesus' temptation, among others.

That seems to perhaps give us a possible **numerological reason** for the length of time for her body to be considered clean. The strange thing, however, is what happens when she gives birth to a girl. “**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**” (**Lev 12:5**). There has been no end to the theorizing of what is going on here.

Way back before the time of Christ, the book of **Jubilees** was the first to comment on it that we know of. They tied the number directly to Adam and Eve, saying that God created Adam and Eve in the first week and in the second week he showed Eve to him, therefore seven and fourteen are the first numbers. God then waited 40 days to bring Adam into the Garden after he made him, but waited 80 to bring Eve in (**Jub 3:8-14**; cf. **DDS 4Q265, 4Q266**). Another tradition says that Cain and Abel both had twin sisters that that Adam offered an offering for the boys at the end of forty days and for the girls he added another after eighty

(**First Book of Adam and Eve 75.12**). In modern times, several other ideas have been offered.

1. *Circumcision*. The circumcision of the boy shortens the mother's impurity. But why should his right have anything to do with her impurity?²⁵
2. *Demons*. Ancient peoples believed that females were more susceptible to demonic influence and this law was given to protect them. This has to do with demons snatching babies on roads as women walked along, things that pagans wrote about all the time. But there is no demonic anything in Leviticus 12.²⁶
3. *Future Mothers*. Because the infant girl will one day become a mother herself, her time is doubled. But many girls wouldn't even give birth and it is against Leviticus to have someone be unclean for something in the future.
4. *Equality*. The extra time might serve as a kind of parallel to the circumcision of the male where both things are viewed as a ritual purification of the babies. Luther viewed circumcision as the

²⁵ 1-3 are summarized in **Matthew Thiessen**, "The Legislation of Leviticus 12 in Light of Ancient Embryology," *Vetus Testamentum* 68 (2018): 298.

²⁶ Many comment on the demonic in relation to Lev 12. Most conclude, with the rest of the book (sometimes Lev 16 excluded) that Leviticus basically doesn't even believe in the demonic world. This can hardly be the case, since he talks about Azazel. It is better to understand that the priests were not obsessed with the demonic world in relation to such things, because their focus was on the sanctify or the tabernacle, which no demon could penetrate. An interesting discussion is **Isabel Cranz**, "Priests, Pollution and the Demonic: Evaluating Impurity in the Hebrew Bible in Light of Assyro-Babylonian Texts," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 14 (2014): 68-86. https://www.academia.edu/29198832/_Priests_Pollution_and_the_Demonic_JANER_14_2014_.

parallel to the suffering that females endure in childbirth (*Works* 3:134).²⁷

5. *Psychic/Psychological*. Recent studies have shown that women identify more strongly with their female infants, and conversely that their relationship to their male infants is characterized by an early respect for the child's autonomy. So the extra time could be seen as helping the mother in the more demanding emotional activity of separating from the newborn girl.²⁸

The two most convincing to me are that:

6. *Baby Girls Bleed Too*. Some vaginal bleeding can occur in the newborn baby girl, and thus the doubling of time takes this into account.²⁹
7. *Medical*. Ancient medical beliefs almost universally understood that boys and girls developed at different rates in the womb. They also believed that women did not menstruate during pregnancy because the blood and accompanying fluids nourished the baby as milk would do after birth. Combining these two things, more fluids would accumulate with a female

²⁷ In **Hammer**, 39 and 44, n. 36.

²⁸ **Nancy Chodorow**, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 109ff; **Ann Oakley**, *Women Confined: Towards a Sociology of Childbirth* (Schocken: New York, 1980), 165l. Cited in Hammer, 44 n. 37.

²⁹ This is **Gane's** preference, ala **J. Magonet**, " 'But If It Is a Girl She Is Unclean for Twice Seven Days ...': The Riddle of Leviticus 12.5," in J. Sawyer, ed., *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas* (JSOTSup 227; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 152.

birth because the girls were not able to intake it at the rate a boy would. This blood was considered unclean and even dangerous, and thus the woman had to be given more time to recover all of the losses if she gave birth to a female.³⁰

At the end of the day, we can't be sure, though **I do think one or more** of these do provide some satisfaction to the question. I will say **it has nothing to do with girls being inferior to boys**. God made male and female together and pronounced them “very good.”

Atoning for the Mother

The law concludes by explaining what happens “**when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter**” (**Lev 12:6**). She is to bring **to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting** (meaning that she is now clean), **a lamb a year old for a burnt offering** (Lev 1), and **a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering** (**Lev 4-5**). Here you can see why I insisted on calling the “sin” offering the better translated “purification” offering. She hasn't sinned! She

³⁰ This is essentially the view of **Thiessen**.

needs to be purified of her ritual uncleanness in the holy place.

It then says, “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” (12:7). We will see this much more clearly in the next two chapters, but like the idea of a “sin offering” needing a better translation, it is important that you **do not import “sin”** into the meaning of “**atonement**” here. Other places, yes. But not here. She hasn’t sinned, so she doesn’t need atonement for sin.

She is unclean, and she needs atonement to make her whole and holy so that she can be fit for God’s presence. If it helps, you can think of this as the difference between justification and sanctification, or maybe even better, glorification, though even here this is only an illustration. Ideally, she is already saved, because she has been called by God as one of his chosen people and she has believed in Christ. Now, she needs to be sanctified from her ongoing impurity. Clearly, there is an analogy here of sin, but it must remain only at that level, lest you start turning childbirth into some kind of monstrosity of evil in your thinking. **Only whole people can stand before God.** This is why we will all

one day need glorified bodies on the day of Christ's glorious coming. We have to be made fit for the heavenly state of embodied existence.

If She Cannot Afford it ... Thoughts on the Birth of Christ

The last verse will take me into the heart of the application. It says, “If she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves 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” (Lev 12:8). It is at this point that I want to turn your attention to [the birth of Jesus](#).

Luke's Gospel records the following. “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 turtledoves, or two young pigeons’” (Luke 2:21-24).

Luke seems to be combining our passage with the law of the firstborn from Exodus 13:2, 13 and/or Numbers 18:15-16.³¹ It says that they came for “their” purification, and this refers most naturally to Mary and Joseph.³² Why would Joseph need purification? It may be best to understand that Luke sees Joseph as unclean because he “contracted” Mary’s condition by aiding in the delivery.³³ The text says that when she touches things, they become unclean.

For our purposes, the important point is that **Mary and Joseph are obeying this law**. Specifically, they are bringing the turtledoves and pigeons, which were reserved for those who could not afford the higher sacrifice. Our Lord, the King of kings, was not born to the Rockefellers, but to a poor carpenter and his betrothed wife, even though royalty was in the bloodline. **“How gracious of God to make**

³¹ David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 269.

³² So Pao (p. 268-69) and Bock (p. 235-36), contra Thiessen (“Luke 2:22”).

³³ There are other interesting solutions as well. See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 236. The idea that “their” refers to Mary and Jesus was held by Origen, but doesn’t make good sense of the grammar. Yet, it is difficult to see how Joseph would become unclean (this comes from the Mishnah) from touching the flow while the baby would not. If it did refer to Jesus as well, then his unclean state would only be ceremonial and not because of original sin. See note 12.

allowances for the poor who couldn't afford a lamb!"³⁴ Andrew Bonar writes, "There was in it a prospective reference to *Mary and Joseph's* poverty (Luke 2:22), or rather this provision was made in order that, when Jesus should be born, he might manifest, by his own poverty, that his salvation was for the poorest on earth—the beggar on the dunghill. In every view we recognize the features of the same glorious Gospel. The voice here may be only a whisper, but it speaks the same truth as at other times; "Ho! *every one* that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and *he that hath no money*."³⁵

What Joseph and Mary are doing is exactly what they should be doing, faithfully observing the law of Moses by taking a long trip to Jerusalem so that **she could be clean**³⁶ and **Jesus could be dedicated** to God as the Firstborn. This is used by Luke with a series of other OT quotations to demonstrate that from the very beginning, the Lord Jesus underwent all that was necessary in order to fulfill the law of God as the New Adam and New Israel.

³⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Holy*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 54.

³⁵ Andrew A. Bonar, *A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus, Expository and Practical* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), 241.

³⁶ This text has been used by some to prove that Mary was not sinless, because she underwent the "sin offering." I do not believe Mary was sinless. But this is not a good place to prove that doctrine. Again, it is not a sin to give birth to a baby.

For you, you must understand that this, “Draws attention to the continuity of salvation history. In fulfilling the requirements of the law, Jesus fulfills the past by bringing it to its climax.”³⁷ The time of completion and wholeness is finally made available to all in Christ. It is because of his work in fulfilling Leviticus 12 that women today are not in a state of uncleanness after they give birth if they are in Christ. Jesus objectively takes away such things by ushering in a new covenant. The old is past, the new is here.

Yet, many are in a perpetual unclean state because they have not been purified by the blood of Jesus. All uncleanness laws teach this. The only way to be clean today is through *his* blood. Her blood makes unclean; his blood cleanses. The only way to be unclean today is by not having his blood cleanse you (of your sins or ritual, physical impurities, it does both). But if you are in Christ, you can be thankful that he has fulfilled the law of the bleeding mother through the faithfulness of his mother and earthly father. You need not worry about having to obey this law any longer if you are a women. Though for her benefit in many

³⁷ David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 271.

ways, there is an underlying terror that if she doesn't perform her ritual duty of offering that she will remain unclean. This is now taken away in Christ. The law of Leviticus 12 is fulfilled.

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