

Motherhood, Birth, and Ritual Purity in the Bible

This week's Torah reading comes from the Book of Leviticus where the theme of ritual purity draws the attention of Jewish commentators. Ancient ritual purity laws, as portrayed in the Bible, is not an easy topic for our twenty-first century sensibilities and can prove challenging reading for many a Christian reader. It is not uncommon to hear certain Old Testament passages dismissed as irrelevant, legalistic, sexist writings, supposedly rejected by Jesus and by our own 'enlightened' times. If this were the case, Leviticus would have little to say to us. Yet, as Christians we believe that these texts form an integral part of our Bible through which we encounter God's revealing word. We need to dig deeper . . .

Leviticus 12 is a good example. Particularly unsettling to contemporary ears are the opening verses that declare a woman who has just given birth to be in a state of ritual impurity:

"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days ... (Leviticus 12:1-2)

When the days of her purification 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 in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering." (Leviticus 12:6)

What is our starting point in unpacking this passage? Let's begin with the knowledge that Judaism holds procreation to be a God-given blessing. Why, then, should a mother, having just given birth, be declared "unclean"? Jewish commentators share this line of questioning. They note that, at the conclusion of her purification period, the Torah calls for both a 'burnt offering' and a 'sin offering.' In particular,

the insistence on a 'sin offering' has puzzled Jewish Torah commentators.

The burnt offering is less problematic. The 15th century Torah commentator, Abravanel,¹ suggests that this was a way for the mother to "cleave to her maker, who had performed wondrous things for her, in delivering her from the pain and danger of childbirth." In other words, this sacrificial action is one of praise and thanksgiving. But why the need for a sin offering when the mother has committed no sin?

In the midrash we find a certain detail viewed through two differing lenses. On the one hand, Rabbi Levi marvels at the wonders of pregnancy and birth: "Human beings entrusted to [the Creator] a drop of fluid in privacy, and the Holy One. . . openly returns to them completed and perfected human individuals. Is this not a matter for praise?"²

By contrast, in another midrashic source, we read: "From whence do you come? From a fetid drop..."³

Whereas Rabbi Levi focuses on the earthy realities of procreation as a holy wonder, the other midrashic source dwells on the insignificance of human beings compared to the majesty of the Creator. The latter has echoes in the Book of Isaiah. There the prophet witnesses a heavenly vision with angelic voices proclaiming "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts (Isa. 6:3)." And how does the prophet respond? "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips (Isa. 6:5)."

Perhaps, then, this is the sense in which the Torah speaks of the impurity and sin offering of a woman after childbirth: she is profoundly in touch with both the greatness and power of the Creator and the smallness and fragility of the newly birthed human being, as well as her own vulnerability.

Our reflections drawn from traditional Jewish commentary suggest that the 'sin offering' closing the mother's purification period need not be interpreted as atonement for sin, but rather as an expression of the 'gap' in perfection between human beings and their Creator. In this way, our Leviticus reading lead us to reflections that can speak to us today; for example:

- In my own life, in what ways am I aware of God's greatness, and my smallness?
- Recall that even the greatest of Christian saints were acutely aware of their own inadequacies and sins.
- What is the difference between awareness of one's human fragility and poor self-esteem?
- What unique insights into life and faith do mothers bring to religious communities through the experience of giving birth?

Perspectives of contemporary Jewish women

As Christian readers we can also be aware that, just as Christian Bible studies today are enriched by the insights of women scholars and educators, so too has a similar development emerged within Judaism. Here we find diverse female opinions that both affirm and critique the tradition for its handling of biblical texts such as Leviticus 12. Some explore the problems in traditional interpretations arising from time-conditioned societal norms. Others draw from the tradition alternative interpretations that are affirming, empowering and protective of women, girls and female experience. (Note: The midrashic insights above are highlighted in the teaching of Nehama Leibowitz, an Orthodox Jewish woman widely regarded as one the most esteemed Torah educators in twentieth-century Israel.) While further discussion is not possible in this brief article, an excellent starting point for those interested is *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008).

A connection with Luke's Gospel

Finally, note the reference to pigeon and turtledove as part of the ritual offerings in

Leviticus 12:6. You may be interested to compare and contrast Luke 2:21-24 where a sacrifice of "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" is mentioned in relation to Mary and Joseph "when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses". As Christians reading the story of Jesus' birth and infancy, we are reminded that Jesus grew up in a Jewish family immersed in ancestral rituals and customs as practised in their day.

1. 15th c. Torah scholar. Cited by Leibowitz, 177.
2. Vayikra Rabbah, Tazria XIV, 2-3.
3. Konteres Aharon, Midrash Yelamdenu. See Leibowitz, 179.

Bibliography: *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (New York, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, (New York, 1996); Eskenazi & Weiss (eds.), *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York, 2008). Levine and Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2017). Scripture: NRSV.

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