

RAW MATERIAL

Studies in Biblical Sexuality

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Chapter 6

Unclean Emissions

Leviticus 15

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Unclean Emissions

Leviticus 15

Leviticus 15 describes a series of genital emissions and the uncleanness imparted by these emissions. First and last are the unhealthy emissions of the male (15:2-15) and of the female (vv. 25-30). The middle of this chapter describes the healthy emissions of the male (vv. 16-18) and female (vv. 19-24). The healthy male emission is semen and the healthy female emission is the monthly menstrual flow. The structure is chiasmic (Whitekettle 34-37), with the transition from male to female emission turning on intercourse between the genders (15:18).

The healthy male emission is the shortest of the four sections in Leviticus 15. Briefly it describes the uncleanness of the male who produces semen, the uncleanness of anything which the semen touches, and the uncleanness of a woman if the male deposits his semen within her. The unclean male does not impart uncleanness to objects or people which he touches. Only the semen itself imparts uncleanness. Seminal uncleanness is not contagious.¹ The unclean male (and his sexual partner) is instructed to wash and is unclean until evening.

The phrase used for seminal emission in 15:16-18,32 is *shakbat-zera* (שִׁכַּבַת זֶרַע). This word-pair is found only in legal material, always dealing with seminal emission (Lev 18:20,23(LXX); 19:20; 22:4; Num 5:13). The verb *shakab* (שָׁכַב) is commonly used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse and most commentators accept the literal meaning as "to lie (down)." This meaning is assumed by the Septuagint translators who use *koimao* (κοιμᾶω), likewise a sexual euphemism which means to lie down. However, Orlinski (40-42) has proposed a meaning of "to pour (out)", thus the verb refers to seminal emission and is a related noun to the phallus. Levine (192) proposes "a layer of semen" for the phrase *shakab-zera* but does not specify which meaning is meant for his English noun "layer" (cf. Orlinski 37-39).

There are a variety of explanations for the uncleanness of seminal emission. Cohen (8-10) argues for semen and menses as potential life, yet substances often wasted, thus a nexus between (potential) life and death. Waste of fertile material is often suggested (e.g. Poorthuis & Schwartz 10). However, even semen which makes a woman pregnant makes both the

¹ In contrast legal writings from Qumran (11Q 45.10; CD 12.1-2) and rabbinic sources (Mishna *Zabim* 4.4-5), do treat seminal uncleanness as contagious.

inseminator and the inseminated unclean. Whitekettle (43-44) points out the double function of the penis as a conduit for semen (potential life) and urine (waste/death). However, urine nowhere is treated as a ritually impure substance. If urine may be accepted as holding a mild impurity Whitekettle's hypothesis could explain both the uncleanness derived from seminal emission and the weakness of the impurity caused by an emission. In general most commentators find a life-death linkage as the primary explanation for the uncleanness imparted by semen and menses.

First the individual with the emission is unclean (15:16), then any clothing or bedding which has contact with the semen is unclean (17). A wide variety of commentators assume this refers to nocturnal emission (cf. Deut 23:11), or masturbation², though the text is not explicit (Milgrom 1991, 928; Hartley 210). Probably the text is not explicit to cover the widest possible range of events. Deposit of semen in a woman is listed separately, distinct from semen deposits on clothing. It is significant that in Numbers 5:13 the emission is specified for adultery, implying that if no semen is emitted the sexual act is not adulterous, at least for the purposes of the adultery trial of Numbers 5 (Milgrom 1990, 302 n.32).

The healthy female emission produces a longer period of uncleanness, and anyone and anything which she touches during this period are likewise unclean. The woman is unclean for seven days, and anyone who touches her or her bedding will be unclean until evening. If a man has sex with her he will also be unclean for seven days, though Lev 20:18 prescribes a stronger penalty for the couple. Leviticus 15 does not specify any compounded uncleanness for the contact between semen and menses.

Menstrual Flow

The emission of menstrual fluid (זֹב / זֹבָה , *zob*, flow)³ in a healthy woman's monthly cycle probably owes most of its uncleanness (נִדָּה, *niddah*) to the identification of menses with blood. Though menses contains blood, which gives it its color, menstrual fluid also contains uterine

² Note that *coitus interruptus* may also be envisioned here. The point of this verse seems to be that the semen lands on clothing or bedding rather than being deposited within a vagina. There is no specification for the sexual activity which produces the semen.

³ The term *zob* is also used for the unhealthy emissions of both male (15:2-15) and female (15:25-30), cf. 2 Sam 3:29.

lining and other components. Even in ancient societies it should have been clear that menstrual flow has different properties from blood: consistency, clotting factors, scent, etc. In fact, the Rabbis gave legal recognition to variations in color and consistency of menses (Sifra 169.1.4), concluding that in its various forms menses still was considered a type of “blood.”⁴ Though it is almost certain that the primary identity of menses in Levitical law was a form of blood loss, blood loss from a common wound incurs no uncleanness, either to the wounded person or to anyone or anything which contacts the blood.

Menses is produced by a healthy woman. It is not the product of a wound, and cessation of its production is not a desired goal in Biblical law (aside from pregnancy). In spite of its regular production in healthy women it was considered uncanny in most ancient cultures (Milgrom 1992, 949-953). One euphemism for menstruation treats the flow as an “illness” or “weakness” (דָּוָה, *dawah*; Lev 12:2; 15:33; 20:18), indicating that even a healthy flow was somehow unhealthy. Three key elements together seem to converge in the legal basis for menstrual uncleanness. Menses is considered a form of blood, a controlled body fluid. It is shed in the normal course of a healthy person’s life, unlike common wounds, but is viewed as an illness (Ellens, 29-30). And menses is shed through the vagina, the entrance through which a woman is inseminated and through which the infant is born. In another connection with reproduction, only a menstruating woman can be impregnated, though not during the menstrual period itself. The onset of menses during puberty signals the beginning of a woman’s reproductive potential, and its cessation in menopause signals the end of reproductive potential (Gen 18:11-12; Luke 1:7,18). Leviticus 15 parallels menses with semen as healthy emissions from the sex organs. In some sense menses was understood as female semen — a woman’s reproductive fluid awaiting the male’s semen, fertile material which was discarded only when insemination did not occur.

Hypothetically, semen may have received its unclean status from menses. Semen could be seen as male menses without the blood-like color. Semen was the male’s fertile fluid, emitted through the reproductive organ. Lacking the obvious blood coloring and having a milder scent,

⁴ Though the rabbis were not 21st century feminists, it is simplistic to claim that they had no interest in issues specific to women. Likewise with other patriarchal traditions. These traditions often fall short in their treatment of female issues, but a critique should be made carefully, with attention paid to specific cases and trends.

semen was a lesser reproductive fluid, thus incurring a lesser uncleanness. The legal texts are not particularly helpful here as they do not detail the reasons and relationships of these unclean body fluids. The precise reasons for the uncleanness of semen and menses are not known or knowable. All arguments are speculative and the reader will have to judge among the various speculations available.

There is one interesting narrative use of menstruation in Genesis 31. Jacob and family have secretly left his uncle and father-in-law Laban. Unknown to Jacob, Rachel has stolen her father's teraphim (idols). Eventually Laban catches up to Jacob and searches the tents of Jacob, looking for his teraphim. Rachel hides the teraphim in her saddle and seats herself upon it. When Laban enters her tent she apologizes for not rising for him and explains that "the way of women" is on her (Gen 31:35). So Laban does not search the saddle on which she is sitting.

No doubt this story was written with a comic flavor. At the very least, Rachel and Laban are idolaters, possessive of the teraphim which Jacob knows are worthless. With theft, pursuit and trickery between father and daughter, the energy expended on these worthless objects is meant to provoke laughter. Rachel's claim of menstruation is part of the comic effect, though it is difficult to tell from our cultural distance whether Rachel's claim or Laban's response is meant to be the greater jest.

Modern commentary on this event is particularly interesting. Male commentators tend to assume that Rachel is indeed menstruating (Coats 220; Brueggemann 259) and comment on how her condition makes unclean these "gods" in her saddle (Hamilton 303; Wenham 276; Brodie 328). Sarna (219) claims this was an act of "willful defilement." Some find the story "subtly" shows contempt for idols (Plaut 211) while others find "a very sharp judgment" against idolatry here (Von Rad 310).⁵ All assume that Rachel made the teraphim unclean by her menstruation.

However, the text does not state that Rachel was in menses, and Rachel is part of a deceitful family. Both her father Laban and her husband Jacob are known for their trickery, and Rachel was the victim of one of her father's tricks on what should have been her wedding day. Rachel is trying to trick her father, so why would she not lie about her condition to keep Laban

⁵ Westermann is an important exception. Showing restraint he describes Rachel's act as "pretense" and finds the story's point in the powerlessness of the idols (p 495). Though Hamilton does inquire whether Rachel fabricated her menstruation, he does so only after two paragraphs which graphically presume she was indeed menstruous.

away from her saddle? After all, it would be rather fortuitous that Rachel was menstruating just when she needed it.

Female commentators are less likely to assume that Rachel is indeed menstruous. Frankel (63) states that Rachel, “pretends to have her period,” and Lapsley (233) finds that “the status of her menstrual cycle is irrelevant.” Niditch (1992, p. 21), Lapsley and Frankel describe in detail the lack of power which women had in this patriarchal culture, and point out that Rachel used one of the few sources of power available to her to conceal her theft. Her weapon was her female potential for uncleanness, and she wielded that weapon effectively. Also we might ask, if Rachel valued the teraphim enough to risk her safety by stealing them, why would she risk their sanctity by making them unclean with her menstrual condition? We could suppose that the same question crossed Laban’s mind, which is one reason why he did not bother to search her saddle.

For some reason most male commentators have not noticed how Rachel used her female disability as a source of power over a man. Instead they join Laban in assuming that Rachel was telling the truth. Perhaps they assume that Rachel lacked the mental acumen to carry out deceit. Perhaps they assume that no woman would lower herself to pretend to be in that abhorrent time of the month, even to save her life or her honor. Or perhaps male commentators are less likely to take female characters seriously and think through their motivations and choices. Whatever the reason, the commentators on this narrative provide a strong example of why people from all situations of life are needed in the task of Bible exegesis. Your situation affects the questions you ask of the text, and questions that do not get asked also do not get answered.

Virginal Blood

In the Talmud (*bKetubot* 6a-b) the rabbis debate at length over the precise status of blood flow which occurs due to hymen breakage following a wedding. They recommend that the groom be separated from the bride following the initial intercourse due to this blood flow and the resulting “uncleanness.” The rabbis concerned themselves both with the issue of seminal contact with virginal blood and contact between virginal blood and menstrual blood. By extension the Biblically recognized blood which signaled virginity was an emission which would make the bride unclean, though apparently not as unclean as menstrual flow. Also, though the recognition of virginal blood is based on the law of menstrual flow, and both virginal blood and menstrual blood are emissions of the same person, the two were distinguished legally with concerns over

whether the two flows of blood might contact each other.

Biblical law does not inquire concerning virginal blood as a kind of menstrual flow, and probably did not consider virginal blood as something which makes a woman unclean. Virginal blood is mentioned only indirectly in one law which mentions virginity tokens (בתולים, *bethulim*), usually assumed to be a blood-stained garment or sheet from the wedding night (Deut 22:13-20).

Though Rabbinic treatment of virginal blood is not particularly Biblical, it does have a practical side. Separation of the bride and groom following the initial intercourse allows the new bride a chance to heal before regular sexual activity would be expected of her.

Holy Places and Holy War

In Exodus 19:15 Moses calls the people (at least the male people) to a convocation before the sacred mount to experience the divine presence and hear the voice of God. He tells the (male) people to not “approach” a woman. “Approach” almost certainly is a euphemism for sexual activity. Leviticus 22:3-4 prohibits a priest who is unclean from seminal emission from ministering in the Sanctuary.

Ellison likes the euphemism “approach” and adds to its semantic burden. He claims that the primary prohibition is not intended to deprecate women, but rather that their (the men?) “thoughts should be turned to the highest.”(103) In other words sex would be a distraction substandard for holy contact with the divine. Though I disagree with Ellison’s interpretation of this text, his point remains a valid one. If God has no sexuality, then human sexuality would probably distract from contact with the divine (Frymer-Kensky 294). Like fasting, sexual abstinence could be understood as a degree of separation from our sub-divine animal nature and not merely a deprivation endured for purposes of discipline or asceticism.

Though Eilberg-Schwartz understands women as the unclean factor (147-148), more likely it is seminal emission which would make the men unclean. Women when not undergoing their own emission — menstruation — are never treated as unclean or a direct cause of uncleanness in men. However seminal emission, with or without a sexual partner, does impart uncleanness.

In particular the uncleanness is evident in the case of holy war. Like Exodus 19, in 1 Samuel 21:4-5 David must reassure the priest that his comrades had kept themselves from women. David describes this as his standard practice for his men during military activity. This

policy plays a role in 2 Samuel 11 when David tries to get Uriah to bed his wife. Uriah's consistent refusal is probably based on David's military policy, and David's sexual incontinence is highlighted by his own warfare policy. As with Exodus 19, 1 Samuel 21 does not specify the precise cause of uncleanness. However, Leviticus 15 certainly suggests that seminal emission is the direct cause of the uncleanness.

There is one more primary text on sexual activity and warfare. Deuteronomy 23:9-11⁶ defines one defilement which would disqualify a man from serving in battle, and this law uses a euphemism which most commentators understand as sexual (nocturnal emission / masturbation), but some commentators understand as non-sexual. For instance, Craigie understands urination within the camp consonant to the instructions in verses 12-14. However, there is no text describing an uncleanness due to contact with or improper disposal of urine. Also the Targums understand seminal emission in verses 9-11, and the Septuagint uses "emissions" (ρυσσεως), a euphemism with definite sexual connotations.

If Deuteronomy 19 does in fact specify seminal emission as the disqualifying factor for military service, there is a strong case for understanding these same emissions in Exodus 19 and 1 Samuel 21.

We should ask how this sexual prohibition affects the common practice of rape during warfare. If rape is practiced at any time during a campaign, the rapist would be disqualified from further action until his uncleanness is purified. Elsewhere the law deals with how female captives are to be treated, but in general they are not to be used for gratification. Among other implications of the sexual prohibition during warfare there is a definite dampening of the rape impulse during war. Indeed, although rape is a threat held over the Israelites should they be overrun by foreign armies, rape is not a threat mentioned against other nations when the armies of Israel march against them.

The one exception to the prohibition on rape seems to be at the end of Judges where the Benjaminites lack wives. The remaining tribes attacked the town of Jabesh-Gilead and the virgins they collected from there they gave to the Benjaminites (Judges 21:8-12). Of course, almost all activities in Judges 19-21 are questionable if not contemptible, and the taking of these virgins

⁶ In the Hebrew text these verses are numbered 10-12 and the following verses as 13-15.

should not be understood as an acceptable practice. Also, the warriors who overran Jabesh-Gilead did not themselves rape the virgins of the city. Rather they took the virgins to be raped and married by others.

The Biblical texts are not always consistent in their treatment of uncleanness due to genital emissions. If a man has intercourse with a menstrual woman, are they unclean for seven days (Lev 15), or should they be removed from the people permanently (Lev 20)? The texts do seem consistent in their treatment of male emissions in warfare (holy war) and in service in the Sanctuary. The emission of semen makes a man ineligible for either holy war or holy Sanctuary service until the period of uncleanness is past. This ineligibility is expressed in a variety of texts and should be understood as basic to Israelite concept of sexuality. Semen causes uncleanness both in the man who produces the semen and in anyone or anything which has contact with the semen. This principle will help elucidate the non-incest laws of Leviticus 18 and 20 (next chapter).

Long-Term Male Abstinence

This brings us to a pair of apocalyptic texts in Daniel and the Book of Revelation. In Daniel 11:37 the villain is described as not understanding the gods of his ancestors and “the desire of women” (הַמְדַת נָשִׁים / *hemdat nashim*). Most modern commentators follow the dubious understanding that this “desire of women” refers to a particular pagan god, Tammuz/Adonis, a god known for being desired by women. However, this god is male and the “desire” or “desired one” in Daniel is female, both in the Hebrew and the Septuagint. It would be odd to refer to a male god as the “desired one” (female) of women.

The traditional reading is that the “desire of women” refers to heterosexual male desire for women. Early Protestant commentators found here a comment on Roman Catholic clerical celibacy (e.g. Luther, *Sermons on Jude* W.14.79), a reading also found in some Jewish commentary (Goldwurm 312). However, as Jesus, Paul and (presumably) John the Baptist were all celibate, and perhaps unmindful of desire for women, early Protestant commentators seem too quick to use this text for their polemics. Another possible reading is that this verse describes Greco-Roman pederasty or non-pederastic homosexual desires.

The context describes the villain as throwing off tradition, specifically the worship of his ancestral gods and/or the God of his fathers. It is an image of a maverick creating a destabilized

culture. If the reference is to pederasty, the cultural context would be one which rejects pederasty (e.g. Judaism, but not Hellenistic Greek culture). If the reference is to celibacy, or possibly eunuch status, any context would work. But it is premature to apply this diatribe to attack all males who resist or lack desire for women.

The male virgins of Revelation 14:4 are the second problem text. The 144,000 are described as virgins (παρθενοι), and “those who have not been defiled with women,” a sharp contrast with the seminal defilement of the texts we have read. Except when menstruous, women are not defiling within the Hebrew Scriptures, nor is male virginity prized, or even noticed. A woman need not be present for a man to become unclean with a seminal emission. In Exodus 19 the (male) Israelites are commanded to keep themselves from women prior to approaching God before the mount, but these men are not assumed to be virgins. Whether Revelation 14:4 describes symbolic or literal virgins, the male virgin is here presented as having a positive value, one which, alone in all the Bible, sees the woman as defiling the (virginal) man. These 144,000 should not be equated with the one in Daniel 11:37 who lacks the desire of women.

Throughout most of the Hebrew Scriptures sexuality is tied closely to reproduction and its corollary, legitimacy. No husband would want to be cuckolded or to raise his wife’s children by an interloper. This is why the virginity of the bride and chastity of the wife are so highly prized. But men could be polygamous, if they could afford it, and male loss of virginity goes unremarked in the Biblical literature. The value of the virginal male is unknown in such a world. The image of male virgins in Revelation 14:4 inverts one very important value system, for only the female virgin has a significant place in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Philo mentions male “virginity” once, but without actually calling the males “virgins” (παρθενοι). In *De Iosepho* 43 Philo claims that among Jews prostitutes are not tolerated and are executed, for not only are the women married as virgins, the males likewise come to the marriage bed undefiled by sexual activity. Although Philo clearly valued male virginity, and found premarital sex to be defiling for the male, he did not find it appropriate to use the term “virgin” to describe a male. Philo highlights the uniqueness of Revelation 14:4 using παρθενοι for males.

The image of male virgins is a Greco-Roman one, not found elsewhere in the Bible or in the Qumran literature (Aune 1998a, 820). Even when Jesus speaks of “eunuchs” (Mt 19:12) or Paul of his wish that church members not marry (1 Cor 7:1,7-9), they do not suggest that the woman defiles the man. The image in Revelation 14:4 sometimes leads readers to blame the

woman for the man's arousal, rather than noting that male arousal often is neither intended nor attempted on the part of the woman. As might be expected, female commentators on the Scriptures have taken special note of this one line in the last book of the New Testament (Pippin 50-53).

Later Uses of Leviticus 15

Although the New Testament takes no particular notice of the uncleanness laws in Leviticus 15, the early church did make some use of them. In the letters of Pope Gregory I preserved in Bede's *Church History* (1.27) the topic of communion is discussed in detail. In particular Gregory answers questions on what activities makes one unable to take communion and what is necessary to make communion available again. Gregory states that a married couple who has had sex must follow the law of cleansing as in Leviticus 15. However, a woman who is menstrous is permitted to take communion because we have the example of the woman with the flow of blood who touched the hem of Christ's garment. Likewise Gregory does not require a woman who has given birth to undergo cleansing before taking communion. He finds no "defect" in the pain of childbirth. However, as sexual activity is pleasurable it is defective, and thus its uncleanness must be purified prior to taking communion.