LEVITICAL THOUGHT AND THE FEMALE
REPRODUCTIVE CYCLE: WOMBS, WELLSPRINGS,
AND THE PRIMEVAL WORLD

by

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Problems and Parameters

Levitical law declared a woman to be impure for seven days during menstruation (Lev. xv 19-24), and for forty days following parturition (Lev. xii 2-4). Although the legal conditions and ritual procedures outlined by these texts are straightforward, it is baffling why they were enacted. The ability to reproduce was considered a constitutive part of human createdness (Gen. i 28a). Menstruation and parturition are natural and normal reproductive processes. Why, then, was a woman deemed to be impure at these particular times, for these specific lengths of time?

It is a common assumption that impurity was ascribed to a woman during menstruation and following parturition because of the bloody, vaginal discharge which occurs at these times. It is thought that because blood represents life (Lev. xvii 11, 14), the loss of blood represents or symbolizes death. Thus, the menstrual or post-partum body is surrounded by an “aura of death” (Wenham [n. 3] p. 434). Careful

1 I would like to thank Dr. Paul-Alain Beaulieu, Mr. Douglas Green, Dr. Phyllis Bird and Ms. Amy Gohdes-Luhman for their suggestions during the gestation of this article.

2 This is the duration of impurity for the male-delivered woman. The reason why the duration is doubled for the female-delivered woman (Lev. xii 5) will be taken up at another time.


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Vetus Testamentum XLVI, 3
consideration shows, however, that the bloody, vaginal discharge did not evoke death in Levitical thought. Furthermore, the locus of impurity was neither the female body nor the discharge.

Note that the Levitical interest in bleeding was limited to vaginal discharges. Numerous situations in which there is potentially fatal bleeding, such as wounds or accidents in the workplace, are not the subject of legislative strictures. If there is no concern with an "aura of death" in many situations in which it would seem appropriate (e.g., a woodchopper whose hand has been cut off), it could not have been a concern in more inappropriate situations (N.B., no woman has ever menstruated to death).

Note, too, that the Levitical interest in bodily discharges was limited to male and female genital discharges (Lev. xii and xv). This restricted focus indicates that impurity was ascribed to menstrual and postpartum women not because they experienced a bodily discharge, but because they experienced a discharge from their reproductive system. The locus of menstrual and postpartum impurity was the female reproductive system in particular, not the female body in general.

Note, finally, that, although the onset of impurity was co-ordinated with the onset of the discharge, the cessation of impurity was not co-ordinated with the cessation of the discharge. A menstuous woman was impure for seven days even though the duration of a menstrual discharge is variable and can last from three to nine days.6 A post-partum woman was impure for forty days even though the puerperal discharge is variable and can last from twenty to sixty days.7 Thus, a menstrual or puerperal discharge could stop before or after the standardized cessation of impurity.8 This dissociation between impurity and

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8 Note that the duration of menstrual and post-partum impurity was not standardized because of the difficulty in correlating the cessation of impurity with the cessation of a temporally variable reproductive discharge. An offset temporal structure was used elsewhere in Levitical law (Lev. xv 13a, 2b) to co-ordinate the duration of impurity with the duration of a temporally variable physiologic process. In such a structure, the cessation of a pathological reproductive discharge commenced a circumscribed period of time, the terminus of which marked the cessation of impurity.

---bodily discharge---
---impurity---/---7 days---

Such a structure was not used to demarcate the duration of menstrual or post-partum impurity.