

Online Bible Study Discussion Starters
Gleaning from Leviticus, Number Three
May 21, 2007

Leviticus 12:1-8 (NRSV)

1. The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:
2. Speak to the people of Israel, saying:
If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean.
3. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.
4. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed.
5. If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days.
6. 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 a turtledove for a sin offering.
7. He shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female.
8. If she cannot afford a sheep, 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 on her behalf, and she shall be clean.

This short chapter details the purification of a woman after giving birth to a child. Like the rest of Leviticus, it seeks to bring all of life into the covenant with Yahweh, Israel's God. Everything is to be covenantal matter. We would probably say everything was to be a *religious* matter, but the ancient Israelites would not have understood what we meant by that concept. For them, it was about relationship, not ritual or doctrine.

One reason Leviticus is confusing to us in its organization is our distinction between religious and secular. We wonder as we read this book of the Bible why regulations governing the conduct of religious rituals are interspersed with regulations governing morals and ethics, including such matters as sexual relations and the treatment of neighbors. For the ancient Israelites, there was a distinction between clean and unclean, but not between religious and secular.

These regulations are given in their time and place, because we human beings always live in a time and a place – a context. People who want life to be absolutely normative, to conform in unchanging ways to unchanging norms and verities, resent the idea of context. They fear that, when it comes to obedience, *contextual* and *relative* (“It depends” on what you want, how you feel about it, and how you spin it) are synonyms, but they are not.

Nearly everyone is normative to a degree (and needs to be). No one, however, is completely normative. Even the most rigid literalist is selective about which parts of the Bible to take literally and absolutely. More to the point, God meets us where we are in time and place; there is nowhere else God could meet us because where we are is the only place in life we are. So, the regulations in Leviticus reflect the beliefs of their time and place, in this case reflecting the belief that body fluids make a person unclean. The reason a man was not to have sexual intercourse the night before going into battle was not (as we might suppose) to save his strength but, rather, to avoid being rendered temporarily unclean by the release of his own body fluids. He was to be dedicated to Yahweh in battle, holy before God, and so he was not to be unclean.

So it is that childbirth was considered to make a woman unclean before God, as did, for that matter, menstruation. I think it is best if, looking at Leviticus in context, we simply accept that view of uncleanness as the norm of those times. It may not make sense to us, but it was part of the understanding of life that prevailed in the ancient Near East. Into that world came Yahweh God, who embraced Israel in covenant and brought the people's life into that covenant and so transformed it, not by changing everything about life all at once, but by relating all of life to Yahweh and the knowledge of Yahweh. A woman marries a man as he is, not as he will be in twenty years. Yahweh adopts Israel into the covenant as Israel is, not as the people will be four hundred years later.

We break Levitical laws regularly. We eat shrimp, clams, crabs, and other seafood that does not come with fins and scales. Leviticus forbids eating them, but we do. True, the New Testament specifically grants Christians that freedom. What does such a change tell us? The norms changed. A new context brought new understandings of the truth of God. Did the truth of God itself change? No, God's truth continues to be redemptive love requiring our response, but God's redemptive love entered into a new context for the people's life.

I doubt you could find a person who wants all restrictions on human behavior to be relative. While I have no problem with understanding Levitical dietary regulations as belonging to an ancient context in which I do not live (and, therefore, no problem with eating shrimp and crab), I object strongly to the idea that the evil of torture is relative to expediencies suggested by people's fear and desire for revenge. I also doubt you will find a person who wants all restrictions on human behavior found in the Bible to be normative – that is, absolute for all times and places, regardless of context, purpose, or effect. We pick and choose. My question would be, “Do we choose on the basis of biblical knowledge of God as we know God in Jesus Christ, or do we pick and choose on the basis of our own prejudices and fears?”

There is great danger in the position that “anything goes.” There is also great danger in the position that “right is right and wrong is wrong” and so there can be no empathy with the person who is doing wrong for any reason. If Jesus had taken that position, we would be lost.

Now, looking at Leviticus 12:1-8, we see the uncleanness is doubled when the baby born is a girl: one week and 33 days for a male, two weeks and 66 days for a female. Why is that? Do we attribute the difference to the truth of God or to the context of the times, the beliefs and biases of the

people? I would choose the latter, but I would also suggest something potentially redemptive within that context.

Within that ancient context Yahweh God entered in redemptive love, girls did not count. Literally, they were not counted. A count of the people numbered only adult males. Women and children were simply also there. Boys, however, had the potential and promise of becoming men. Girls did not. The value of a wife was determined by her bearing her husband many strong sons. They did not know the “choice” of gender was determined by the man’s seed. A wife who bore her husband no sons lived in shame, as one unblessed by God. See the story of Hannah in I Samuel, chapter one.

So, let me phrase the question differently. Does the torah of Yahweh even provide for the birth of girl? Does it count enough to be included in torah? Can the mother of a baby girl be cleansed and restored to Yahweh and to the covenant community? The answer is, *Yes*, but it simply takes twice as long. No, I am not suggesting that answer would be satisfactory now, within our context. Today, it would be outrageous for the church to suggest that childbirth made a woman unclean – unacceptable before God – and doubly outrageous to say she was twice as unclean if she bore a girl. But God meets us where we are and works with us there, moving us forward in grace. So, yes, the birth of a girl was important to Yahweh God and was part of the covenant. Provision was made and normalized. It did count.

Further, this passage gives the mother an active role in the covenant community’s process of life in relation to Yahweh God. She takes the steps. She presents the sacrificial animal to the priest. She acts on her own behalf in response to God’s torah. It is her responsibility.

Notice the final verse where, again, provision is made for the poor. “If she cannot afford a sheep, 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 on her behalf, and she shall be clean.” Luke shows us Mary and Joseph presenting two doves or pigeons after the birth of Jesus.