

## Sex, sin and the sacred

or, Even 'natural' is not normal – not to mention 'holy'

For the creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of decay into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. — ROMANS 8:20-22

### Analysis

#### A. (15:1-18) Uncleaness caused by male discharges

Kaiser remarks that some commentators are of the opinion that chapter 15 is dislocated, that it would be more appropriately placed before chapter 12 (on uncleanness and childbirth). But Wenham suggests a different principle of organization than subject. He points out that chapters 11-15 anticipate a more or less descending period of uncleanness, with the genital discharges of ch. 15 bringing a period of uncleanness lasting merely a week, but only till evening after intercourse.

[ch 11-15] Wenham remarks [19-20] that the word "clean" as used in these chapters might be approximated with the medical use of the word "normal" today. Hence, in Israel there were really 3 categories for ritual or moral analysis: unclean (= profane), clean and holy. Something must be rendered clean before it can be made holy or sacred.

[15:1] Kidner reminds us [121] that bodily discharges would often be the result of gonorrhoea, which is commonly caused by sexual promiscuity. Though the Law does not necessarily link unsanctified sex with ceremonial uncleanness, the link would often be made by the sinner.



**ISHTAR, ASTARTE, ASHTEROTH, INANNA, APHRODITE, VENUS**

The Canaanite & Near East's supreme goddess, known by variants of the same name, but (strangely?) the goddess of both love AND war. Her cult, which involved imitative sex magic and sacred prostitution, is the target of many of the Levitical restrictions. Aphrodite is the Greek version of the same deity.

[15:1] Moses and Aaron are both addressed, as in the case of the disease of leprosy (13:1). Wherever there is only a law laid down, Moses alone hears the voice. God speaks only to the lawgiver. But, in cases where disease is prescribed for by special rules, Aaron is joined with Moses. Is this because a priest – a high priest – ought to have much compassion, and might be more likely to learn compassion while hearing the tone of pity in which the Lord spoke of man's misery? [Bonar 287]

#### B. (15:19-30) Uncleaness caused by female discharges

Were females excluded from worship and society one week every month?

A surface reading might indicate that is the case. However, modern female norms and physiology are misleading. Several factors, Kaiser points out, weigh against such a regular prohibition. One, females married shortly after puberty. Second, pregnancy was regular and frequent. Third, weaning did not take place until several years of breast-feeding. So menstrual discharge would be less a factor than now.

Harrison [161-162] links the types of defilement with the presence in the discharge of dead matter. Infections involve, as we now know, the death of white blood cells, so that all infection-related discharges are tied to both life and death even physically – not to mention symbolically. The possibility of contagion, of course, is also literal, as well as spiritual.

[15:19-24] Why is the woman's case dealt with so severely? Perhaps; to keep up the memory of "The Fall." The woman was in the transgression. "Remember whence thou art fallen." Our original sin, inherited from our first parents, is not to be forgotten. The Lord never forgets that time of the fall, even as he never forgets the day when the angels left their first habitation. Of what parents have we come? See the rock out of which we were hewn! "Thy father was an Amorite, and thy mother an Hittite." [Bonar 295]

[15:19-24] The woman, Harrison reminds us [164-165], might welcome this regular respite from her daily duties, which might serve to recharge her energies, whereas husband and children, were it not for the regular ritual 'defilement', might make unremitting demands upon her.

Ritual defilement – restriction, but recharge!

#### C. The sacred place of sex in creation and covenant community

Harrison notices that even the structure of the chapter is artful, illustrating the chiasmic structure which so often characterizes the pattern of Hebrew poetry, even prose. The chiasmic pattern here is the order of discharge dealt with, in males chronic (vv 2-12) then intermittent (16-18), in females intermittent (19-24) then chronic (25-27). In other words, the order is reversed, making the structural centre the coition or coming together of male and female (v 18). Thus even the sequence of the subject order is significant to the sacred place of sex in the covenant, indeed in creation itself. [see Harrison 159]

Even the single day uncleanness attached to 'normal' man/wife sex relations would have the salutary effect of separating Israel from the fertility cults which surrounded them. Sacred prostitution could gain no hold in a culture where both married and

unmarried sex involved ritual restrictions, and where prostitution would render the offender more or less permanently unclean, at least in a worship context. [see Harrison 166]

As is pointed out by Wenham [219], this one day restriction would effectively mean that any male or female involved in any sacred activity – even Israel's 'holy' wars – would be forbidden sexual activity. How would this limit our enthusiasm for casual worship – even our passion for war – if even more powerful passions had to be sacrificed?

Banned from worship *and*  
war – keeping sex in its  
'normal' place!

### **Summary:**

#### **Defilement – and the wonder of a woman's faith**

It is another moral lesson which is brought before us in these laws that, as God looks at the matter, sin pertains not only to action, but also to being. Not only actions, from which we can abstain, but operations of nature which we cannot help, alike defile; defile in such a manner and degree as to require, even as voluntary acts of sin, the cleansing of water, and the expiatory blood of a sin-offering. One could not avoid many of the defilements mentioned in this chapter, but that made no difference; he was unclean. For the lesser grades of uncleanness it sufficed that one be purified by washing with water; and a sin-offering was only required when this purification had been neglected; but in all cases where the defilement assumed its extreme form, the sin-offering and the burnt-offering must be brought, and be offered for the unclean person by the priest. So is it, we are taught, with that sin of nature which these cases symbolised; we cannot help it, and yet the washing of regeneration and the cleansing of the blood of Christ is required for its removal. Very impressive in its teaching now becomes the miracle in which our Lord healed the poor woman afflicted with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34), for which she had vainly sought cure. It was a case like that covered by the law in chap. 15:25-27; and he who will read and consider the provisions of that law will understand, as otherwise he could not, how great her trial and how heavy her burden must have been. He will wonder also, as never before, at the boldness of her faith, who, although, according to the law, her touch should defile the Lord, yet ventured to believe that not only should this not be so, but that the healing power which went forth from Him should neutralise the defilement, and carry healing virtue to the very centre of her life. Thus, if other miracles represent our Lord as meeting the evil of sin in its various manifestations in action, this miracle represents His healing power as reaching to the very source and fountain of life, where it is needed no less. [Kellogg 310-311]