

Leviticus 12

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All ancient cultures had rules and rituals for childbirth. Somewhat naturally then we encounter instructions, albeit short ones, for Israelite childbirth. The passage starts with the Lord speaking only to Moses. The absence of Aaron, who is spoken to in chapters 11 and 13 but not here, is noteworthy. Moses holds the role of prophet for the community, thus in Jewish exegesis, there is a prophetic link to the miracle of bringing children into the world. The second verse literally reads; 'If a woman produces seed and gives birth to a male child'. It could have just more simply read; 'If a woman gives birth'. So why the explicit reference to seed when biologically a woman only produces eggs? There is a prophetic link to Genesis 3 in which the 'seed of a woman' will have enmity, and ultimately defeat, the Enemy.

Having children and populating (literally 'to fill') the earth is one of the first commands the Lord gives mankind. It is considered a *mitzvah* to have children and it is not considered a sinful activity. For surely the Lord would not command you to perform a sin! The issue here is not with sin, per se, but with purity, of clean and unclean. The presence of blood during childbirth necessarily meant that the woman was now in an impure state, yet at the same time blood was considered to be the life force of the body. As it is written, 'Life is in the blood'. Blood could not be consumed and it belongs to God and needs to be treated with sacred care. Hence blood was considered both impure and sacred at the same time.

The woman would be in a shorter or longer state of impurity depending on the sex of the baby: 40 days for a male child and 80 days for a female child. There are no explanations in scholarship that can account for the time difference. Some commentators noted that this forms an ancient maternity leave for the woman, which can put a positive spin on things. There is no mention of the husband in this process at all. Purity, holiness as well as sin are transferable. The woman would be forbidden from touching holy objects or visiting sacred places during this time lest she passes on her impurity to others or to things. Should the child be male, then on the eighth day he would be circumcised. This was a command given to Abraham in Genesis 17. It was to be a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. This individual personal sign would obviously apply to the males. However, what about the females? What sign did they receive to remind them of the covenant with God? The short answer is none! Does this mean that women are inferior in some way or fall outside of the covenant unless attached to a man? It's a lot more complicated than that. Biblically women played a prophetic role in the redemption of humanity. God breathed life into Adam, the first man.

Since then, life came from a woman. Women would partake in the act of creation, as the ancients saw it. Some of the chief deities of the pagan world were fertility goddesses. During the Exodus, it was Miriam who used her prophetic calling to locate water, the source of life, for the Israelites in the desert. And it was the 'seed of the woman' which would bring the downfall of the Enemy. In the New Testament, we see a high appreciation for the calling of women. Paul says cryptically in 1 Timothy 2:15 that 'women will be saved through childbearing, should they continue in faith, love and holiness'. Faithful women could also be a covering for their unbelieving husbands, and vice versa in 1 Corinthians 14. In much of Christian theology, the focus is on the individual and their personal salvation and standing before the Lord. The Jewish people did, and still do, also think in terms of community. Households are saved and covenants and blessings are made with 'houses' and generations of family. Perhaps we think too little of the faith of our partners and family members when we constrain redemption only to the individual level. This also widens our

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individual responsibility to maintain our personal faithfulness within families and social groups, for holiness is also transferable.

At the conclusion of the time of purification, the woman was required to bring a sacrifice to the priest. Lambs were preferred but birds would suffice in the case of poverty. We note that in Mary and Joseph's case with Jesus, they bring two doves which signifies their impoverished condition. The Magi had yet to arrive and bring the gold and incense gifts. There were two offerings made before the Lord, a burnt offering and a sin offering. As noted in previous studies, burnt offerings and sin offerings were for unintentional sin. As procreation was a command from God one would assume that the intention had been to get pregnant all along, and not unintentionally, so what sin are we referring to here? Jewish commentary notes several options. One ancient tradition states that during the time of the birth the woman unwittingly said a lie! She swore she would never let her (insert profane word of choice here) husband touch her again. Another tradition notes the dangerous journey that childbirth is and sin offerings were applicable for those arriving safely from long journeys. A more modern tradition is noted by Lord Rabbi Sacks that the sin offering was for the future sins that the child would commit, somewhat akin to Job sacrificing for the future sins of his children. Whatever the reason, it is the priest, not the sacrifices, who makes atonement for the woman (and not the child). Atonement, 'covering' in Hebrew, is not the same as forgiveness. Atonement here is for purity and not concerned with sin. After this offering, she is clean, not forgiven.

During our discussion, we looked at some of the differences between the concepts of atonement and forgiveness. Jesus the Messiah is the Passover Lamb, a sin offering to take away the sins of the world. What differences do we note concerning the Festival of Passover and the Day of Atonement? The Day of Atonement is actually in the plural form, it is the Day of Atonements. There are multiple sacrifices on Yom Kippur but only one Lamb at Passover. During the Day of Atonement the command is to fast. Conversely, the Passover Lamb must be consumed in a feast of one sitting. The sacrifices on Yom Kippur covered the whole community irrespective of their participation in the event, while the blood of the Lamb covered individual households only if they apply the blood themselves. The fact that your neighbours applied blood on the doorframes did not affect your household in the slightest. Passover was for redemption from the Angel of Death and atonement a covering that involved an exchange, something for something. Passover involved behaviour (the applying of blood) but no exchange. Forgiveness comes without an exchange alongside right behaviour. Faith without works is dead!