

## THE 'UNCLEANLINESS' OF MENSTRUATION: AN AFRICAN FEMINIST READING OF LEV. 15:19-24

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**Emem Opoku-Agyemang**

***Abstract:** In Ghana, as in many other countries in Africa, the natural phenomenon of menstruation is considered taboo. People cannot speak freely about it but resort to the use of euphemisms, which made it difficult if not impossible to sensitize the public on the health effects of using unsanitary products like rags and used cloths as pads. This attitude is not only contemporary but can also be found in the Bible. It is against this backdrop that the article investigates the perceived 'uncleaness' of menstruation through a literary analysis of Lev. 15:19-24. To engage the text and Ghanaian reality, the paper employs the Communicative approach to African Biblical Hermeneutics from a feminist perspective. Major findings are that both Jewish and Ghanaian cultures regard menstruation as a time that restricts women's movement in cult, society, and the home. The article advocates for a change of perspective knowing that what God has created cannot render the physical sacred space impure. The focus of the church should be on the 'new' sacred space, which is the human body (1 Cor. 6:19). Therefore, caring for the body implies personal hygiene but entails creating an inclusive environment, free from any form of discrimination perpetuated by cultural traditions that are not only anachronistic but harmful and against the Gospel's message.*

**Key Words:** Communicative Approach to African Hermeneutics, Euphemism, Ghana, Lev. 15:19-24, Menstruation, Taboo.

### **Introduction**

In Ghana, issues about women's health, for example, menstruation, have recently been given some attention in the media. The recent 'Menstrual Health and Hygiene Day' on May 28, 2022, made waves, especially in the non-traditional media space. Several groups advocated and promoted good menstrual health and hygiene for girls and women. The day was earmarked to raise awareness of the need for menstrual health and hygiene and to change the negative social perception around the topic of menstruation. It was also aimed at

engaging decision-makers to increase the leadership priority and actions for menstrual health and hygiene at all levels.

It is, however, observed that apart from this annual recurrence, girls and women in Ghana seldom speak about their experiences because the word ‘menstruation’ itself is a verbal taboo.<sup>1</sup> There are cultural biases surrounding the topic which are very influential and tend to impede the progress that has been made since the creation of this Menstrual Health and Hygiene Day in 2014. In some Christian contexts, biblical texts like Lev. 15:19-24 are used to support the notion that menstruation is not just impure, but it is a taboo.

Against this backdrop, the paper examines the topic of menstrual impurity from Ghanaian socio-cultural and biblical contexts. It employs the Communicative approach to African biblical hermeneutics from a feminist perspective to offer a women-sensitive and communal understanding of the ‘uncleanness’ of menstruation and its implications. The communicative approach is structured into three steps: exegesis of reality, exegesis of the text; and engagement of the biblical text with the contemporary reality.<sup>2</sup> The exegesis of reality discusses the taboo of menstruation in Ghana, most especially in the Akan ethnic group; the exegesis of the text, Lev. 15:19-24, explores the ‘uncleanness’ of menstruation as part of the purity codes. The last step is an engagement of the text and the Ghanaian reality to bring transformation in the lives of girls and women.

## **Exegesis of Reality**

### *The Situation*

The issue of menstruation and the social norms surrounding it have affected the lives of Ghanaian girls and women negatively. House, Mahon and Cavill reported that 48-59% of girls in urban areas and 90% in rural areas of Ghana felt ashamed during their menstrual period. For this reason, about 95% of girls are absent from school during their menstruation.<sup>3</sup> These findings were confirmed by an article,

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<sup>1</sup> Kofi Agyekum, “Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo among the Akan of Ghana,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 58, no. 3 (2002): 370.

<sup>2</sup> George Ossom-Batsa, “Africa Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspectives,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Sarah House, Therese Mahon and Sue Cavill, “Menstrual Hygiene Matters: A Resource for Improving Menstrual Hygiene Around the World,” <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/sites/g>

published recently in the Ghanaian Times, where it was stated that the issue of menstruation is a major cause of female school dropout. The reasons adduced included fear, stigma, and the likelihood of staining themselves with menstrual blood.<sup>4</sup>

This situation is not just peculiar to Ghana. According to recent studies conducted in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe, menstrual-related taboos and restrictions have affected the lives of girls in the aforementioned countries, resulting in health impairments and development, and poor participation of girls in social life.<sup>5</sup> Because of the growing concern from the church and society at large, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), celebrities, church organizations and concerned citizens are passionate about conscientizing the public of the negative effects of these restrictions and taboos on the health of girls and women in Ghana.

In 2019, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) partnered with The Becca Hearts Foundation<sup>6</sup> to organize a sensitization outreach in Jamestown, a well-known community in Accra, Ghana. This sensitization targeted adolescents, including boys, to discuss issues of menstrual health and hygiene. Boys were involved because they were seen as advocates who can provide peer support to the girls. On October 11, 2021, The Church of Pentecost marked the International Day of the Girl Child with a sensitization workshop on menstruation and menstrual hygiene, where they discussed its impact on girl-child empowerment.<sup>7</sup> These efforts are indications that churches and groups in society have recognized the effect that social norms have on girls.

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files/jkxooof256/files/Menstrual%20hygiene%20matters%20low%20resolution.pdf [accessed October 12, 2022].

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Donkor, "Menstruation: Major Cause of Female School Dropout," <https://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh/menstruation-major-cause-of-female-school-dropout/> [accessed October 10, 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), "Girls in Control: Compiled Finding from Studies on Menstrual Hygiene Management of Schools," [http://www.snv.org/public/cms/sites/default/files/explore/download/snv\\_girls\\_in\\_control\\_baseline\\_report.pdf](http://www.snv.org/public/cms/sites/default/files/explore/download/snv_girls_in_control_baseline_report.pdf) [Accessed September 24, 2022]. SNV Netherlands is a not-for-profit international development organization that focuses on agriculture, energy, water, sanitation and hygiene. They are driven by the United Nations Sustainable development goals.

<sup>6</sup> A foundation established by a Ghanaian celebrity.

<sup>7</sup> JMWC Media, "The Church of Pentecost Marks International Day of the Girl Child, October 14, 2021; <https://thecophq.org/the-church-of-pentecost-marks-international-day-of-the-girl-child/> [Accessed: July 15, 2022].

To further understand the context of Ghana, the next section will study taboos and, specifically menstruation taboos within the context of the Akan<sup>8</sup> culture of Ghana.

### *Taboos of Menstruation in Ghana*

Agyekum defines a taboo as “a system of placing prohibitions and restrictions on certain acts and utterances in a society.”<sup>9</sup> These prohibitions are considered binding per the norms and values of that society. Appiah Kubi further indicates that the definition of taboo in the Akan social context is simply prohibition related to things and modes of behaviour considered to be unclean and menstrual blood is one of them or better put, physical contact with a menstruant.<sup>10</sup> A study done by Plan International in the Upper Manya Krobo district in Ghana revealed that girls and young women are raised with many cultural traditions and very little knowledge about menstruation.<sup>11</sup> These girls undergo the effects of various superstitions which include not being allowed to enter their homes when menstruating, underlined by the syntagm *wese yami*, which means going behind the house. It can only be imagined the stress and discomfort the girls endure during a time that is a biological event. This situation is present also in the Akan society, where the word ‘menstruation’ (*kyima*) itself is a verbal taboo and members of these communities usually adhere to the restrictions without complaining or questioning their origins. Oduyoye observes that among the Akans, food and drink for the spirit world must be prepared by persons who are free from any flow of blood.<sup>12</sup> As a result, women’s participation in rituals is often limited or excluded.

The word ‘taboo’ may sound ‘primitive,’ but the reality is that the taboo of menstruation evokes fear in modern people that live in a world governed by the rules of science.<sup>13</sup> People are afraid of

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<sup>8</sup> The Akans are the largest ethnic group in Ghana making up 47.3% of the population. Ghana Statistical Service, “2010 Population and Housing Census,” 61.

<sup>9</sup> Agyekum, “Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo,” 370.

<sup>10</sup> K. Appiah Kubi, *The Akan of Ghana, West Africa: A Cultural Handbook for Reference* (Bloomfield, CT: Cowhide Press, 1999), 63.

<sup>11</sup> “Ghana: Let’s Talk About Periods – Tackling Taboos in Ghana,” June 28, 2020; [www.al-Africa.com/stories/202006280095.html](http://www.al-Africa.com/stories/202006280095.html) [Accessed July 12, 2022].

<sup>12</sup> Mercy A. Oduyoye, “Women and Rituals in Africa,” in *The Will to Arise*, ed. Mercy A. Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 10-19.

<sup>13</sup> Alma Gottlieb, “Menstrual Taboos: Moving Beyond the Curse,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, ed. Chris Bobel et al. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 145.

menstrual blood because they believe that contact with menstrual blood exposes them to danger; therefore, avoidance provides protection.

*The Impact: Fear, Euphemism and Exclusion*

It is observed that taboo and fear are closely related. Due to this fear, it has become difficult if not impossible to sensitize the public on the health effects of using unsanitary products like rags and used cloths as pads because the topic in itself is considered private or even a taboo. A study conducted among JHS students in the Talensi district of the Upper East Region in Ghana confirms this assertion; it was observed that adolescent girls suffered infections and other health complications due to the use of rags and other unsanitary products as menstrual absorbents. The researchers cited taboos as a major barrier to menstrual health and hygiene.<sup>14</sup>

To offer clarity on the subject, Agyekum avers that taboos, and various interpretations attached to them, derive from culture.<sup>15</sup> Just like every other prohibited topic, menstrual taboos are linked to the people's belief system which evokes fear. In some societies, curses are even attached to them. According to Appiah Kubi, eating food prepared by a menstruant is forbidden and even more so having sexual relations with her because of the belief that it will weaken the man's spirit as a result of a disconnection from the ancestors and gods.<sup>16</sup>

Selvidge quotes Bamberger to state that since ancient times, human beings have always been horrified in their reaction to the phenomena of menstruation,<sup>17</sup> a kind of fear that can result in 'coded' speech whenever speaking about menstruation. Women in Ghana often used euphemisms in describing or referring to menstruation. Agyekum avers that menstruation falls into the category of the *ammodin* which literally means 'the unmentionables.' The *ammodin* are items or occurrences that are part of everyday conversations but cannot be

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<sup>14</sup> Maxwell T. Kumbeni, Eason Otopiri, and Florence A. Ziba, "Menstrual Hygiene among Adolescent Girls in Junior High Schools in Rural Northern Ghana," *Pan African Medical Journal* 37, no. 190 (2020): 3.

<sup>15</sup> Agyekum, "Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo," 368.

<sup>16</sup> Appiah Kubi, *The Akan of Ghana*, 68.

<sup>17</sup> Marla J. Selvidge, "Mark 5:23-24 and Leviticus 15:19-20: A Reaction to Restrictive Purity Regulations," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 no. 4 (1984): 621, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260473>.

mentioned in plain words; instead, they are replaced with euphemisms to maintain a linguistic decorum.<sup>18</sup>

Akan menstruation euphemisms include but are not limited to the following:

<i>ɔngyinaa yie</i>	“She is not standing well”
<i>ɔnkɔ gya hɔ</i>	“She does not go to the kitchen”
<i>Wakɔ afikyire</i>	“She has gone behind the house”
<i>ɔnkɔ ahemfie</i>	“She does not go to the palace”
<i>ɔnkɔ nkonwafie so</i>	“She does not go to the stool room”
<i>Waba/ɔkɔ mmaa fie</i>	“She has come/gone into women’s house” <sup>19</sup>

Some of these euphemisms are used by Akan women whenever they want to talk about menstruation among themselves, especially in the public space. Some are even used by men when the need arises to inform each other of a woman’s *kyima* (menstruation).

Gottlieb affirms not only words convey a message, but also *avoidance of words*. In other terms, whether we say the words or avoid them, we are evoking a certain understanding. This act of replacing words with euphemisms leads to the subject of taboo including its effects.<sup>20</sup> She adds that our reliance on euphemisms instead of speaking plainly about menstruation is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, which is inherent in Judeo-Christian traditions.<sup>21</sup> This attitude is evident in some Christian traditions where the reason for the exclusion of women from leadership positions is based on their menstrual cycle. In these traditions, the pulpit is deemed a sacred space where the menstrual blood is capable of desecration.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Agyekum, “Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo,” 371.

<sup>19</sup> Agyekum, “Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo,” 373.

<sup>20</sup> Gottlieb, “Menstrual Taboos,” 145.

<sup>21</sup> Gottlieb, “Menstrual Taboos,” 145.

<sup>22</sup> Tiwatola Abidemi Falaye, “A Review of African Initiated Churches and their Contributions to the Development of Education in Nigeria,” *International Journal of African and Asian Studies* 15 (2015): 3.

Apart from these exclusions, the churches seldom speak about the effect of menstrual taboos on women who constitute the majority of their membership. To fill the gap, there is, therefore, the need to examine how Scripture can provide tools to engage Ghanaian socio-cultural beliefs on menstruation. Thus, the next section of the paper analyses Lev. 15:19-24 to discover how the Hebrew Bible treats the issue of the perceived uncleanness of menstruation to offer possible solutions for the transformation of the Ghanaian context.

## **Exegesis of the Text**

### *Clean and Unclean in Leviticus*

The question of purity and impurity is central in the Jewish religion, connected with the holiness of God and the dwelling of God among his people. In Num. 5:1-4, YHWH commands that leprous and other unclean persons must be kept outside the camp. The entire encampment was treated as a sacred space because of the presence of the Tabernacle. Ancient Israelite prophets like Hosea and Ezekiel also spoke about the removal of idols and foreign gods from Israel, including condemning abominable acts in the temple (Ezek. 8; 24:13; Hosea 4:14).

The distinctions in the Torah regarding clean and unclean objects or persons were either for cultic or arbitrary purposes and these were given to mirror the holiness of God. Leviticus, for instance, was written to provide guidelines to priests and laypeople concerning appropriate behaviour in the presence of a holy God; thus, the emphasis is on communicating instructions. It was intended for the entire Israelite community to know and value their privileges and responsibilities before God. There were degrees of uncleanness in the Torah because ritual impurities required simple purification: for example, washing and waiting a short time (Lev. 15:5; 8) while others required more involved rites (Lev. 12:6-8; 14). It is, therefore, important to note that impurity was part of daily life because it was difficult, if not impossible to avoid impurity.

However, Erbele-Kuster argues that “a reader who opens the Torah in the middle (Leviticus) cannot avoid the impression that uncleanness

has a female face.”<sup>23</sup> For instance, as seen in Lev. 12:2, 5, the length of time of impurity depends on gender and so making impurity a gender-relevant category. For example, when a woman gives birth to a male child, she was declared unclean for thirty-three days whereas if it was a female child, for sixty-six days. It is, therefore, expedient to see how Leviticus presents the issue of impurity especially as it relates to normal female discharge.

<sup>19</sup> And when a woman has a flow and the issue in her body is blood, she will become impure for seven days and everything that touches her will be unclean until the evening. <sup>20</sup> And everything that she will lie upon in her impurity will become unclean and also everything that she sits upon will be unclean. <sup>21</sup> And anyone who touches her bed will wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and will be unclean until the evening. <sup>22</sup> Anyone who touches any utensil on which she sits upon will wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and become unclean until the evening <sup>23</sup> and if it is on the bed or anything upon which she sits, when he touches it he will be unclean until the evening. <sup>24</sup> And if a man lies with her so that her impurity comes upon him, he will be unclean for seven days and every bed which he lies upon will be unclean (Lev. 15:19-24).

### *Delimitation*

The book of Leviticus comprises two major sections. Chaps. 1-16, which is the main Priestly (P) text that comprises descriptions of the sacrificial system, the inaugural service at the sanctuary, and the laws of impurities and chaps. 17-26 is the Holiness (H) text, which includes a section on commutation of gifts to the sanctuary (chap. 27). Leviticus presents rules governing physical ritual impurities associated with the birth-death cycle of mortality, which must be separated (in some cases by sacrifices) from the sphere of holiness and life (chaps. 11–15). Special rituals on the yearly Day of Atonement, culminating in the first major part of Leviticus, remove both moral faults and physical impurities from the sanctuary and the Israelite community (Lev. 16).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Dorothea Erbele-Kuster, “Gender and Cult: Pure and Impure as Gender Relevant Categories,” in *Bible and Women: An Encyclopedia of Exegesis and Cultural History – Torah* ed. Irmtraud Fischer, Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Andrea Taschl-Erber (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 375.

<sup>24</sup> Roy E. Gane, *Commentary on Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 13.

The text under study is found in the section of Leviticus that deals with the impurity system (Lev. 11—15). It contains laws dealing with four sources of impurity: carcasses (11), childbirth (12), scale diseases (13-14) and genital discharges (15). The immediate context, chapter 15, is composed of two sections: natural discharges of men (vv. 16-18) and women (19-24), which are removed simply by bathing. The second section deals with pathological discharges of men (vv. 2-15) and women (vv. 25-30), which require sacrificial cleansing. Verses 19-24 are found in the second section as indicated above, which gives regulation to women with normal blood discharges, specifically, the monthly menstrual flow. The verses that follow, that is, vv. 25-30 concern discharges that are abnormal in nature.

The criteria for the delimitation of the text are the following:

It is observed that the author of Leviticus uses *for* or *when* (כִּי) as unit markers and sometimes in combination with *which* (אֲשֶׁר). This is seen in verse 2 (“when Yahweh” - כִּי יְהוָה), verse 16 (“when he brings out” - כִּי יֹצֵא) verse 18 (“and when a woman that” - וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר) and in verse 25 (“when she has a flow” - כִּי יִזְרַח). The section under study begins with verse 19 with the unit marker כִּי תִהְיֶה (“when she becomes”).

Furthermore, vv. 19-24 cover a specific theme, normal bodily discharges of women; therefore, for literary and thematic criteria it can be studied as a distinct textual unit.

### *Structure*

Milgrom structures the text in an expanded form where he includes a breakdown of the entire chapter 15. The chapter is structured in a chiasmic ABCC<sup>1</sup>B<sup>1</sup>A<sup>1</sup> pattern, equally divided between men and women as shown below:

- A. Introduction (vv. 1-2a)
- B. Male discharges, long-term (vv. 2b-15)
  - 1. Definition (vv. 2b-3)
  - 2. Consequences (vv. 4-12)
  - 3. Purification by sacrifice (vv. 13-15)
- C. Male discharges, short-term (vv. 16-18)
  - 1. Semen emission (vv.16-17)
  - 2. Intercourse (v. 18)

C<sup>1</sup>. Female discharges, long-term (vv. 25-30)

1. Menstruation (vv. 19-23)
2. Intercourse (v. 24)

B<sup>1</sup>. Female discharges, long-term (vv. 25-30)

1. Definition (v. 25)
2. Consequences (vv. 26-27)
3. Purification by sacrifice (vv. 28-30)  
[Consequences for the Sanctuary and for Israel  
(v. 31)]

A<sup>1</sup>. Summary (vv. 32-33)

Just like Milgrom, Erberle-Kuster uses the chiasmic structure to focus attention on the different sexes that are addressed “to ascertain the extent to which gender symmetry does or does not prevail in the exposition.”<sup>25</sup>

She delineates regulations for sexual intercourse to the centre of the structure because it is an act that brings the two sexes together. The next sections B and B<sup>1</sup> are about the normal discharges of males and females, respectively. The outer sections A and A<sup>1</sup> deal with discharges from both sexes that are deemed abnormal. The sections O and O<sup>1</sup> form the introduction and conclusion of the chapter. Her basic structure is as follows:

O Introduction (vv. 1-2a)

A. Male genital discharges (vv. 2b-15)

B Seminal emissions (vv. 16-17)

B<sup>1</sup> Sexual intercourse (v. 18)

A<sup>1</sup> Abnormal prolonged uterine bleeding (vv. 25-30)

O<sup>1</sup> Conclusion (vv. 31-33)

Both Milgrom and Erberle-Kuster do not present an expanded structure of 15:19-24, rather they include it as a subsection of the entire chapter.

As a textual unit 15:19-24 can be structured based on the characters that are addressed:

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<sup>25</sup> Dorothea Erbele-Kuster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus* (New York-London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 63.

- vv. 19-20: Regulations directly to the Menstruant
  - v. 19a - Specification of Impurity
  - v. 19b-20 - Impurity Regulation to the Menstruant.
- vv. 21-24: Regulations for Secondary Defilement
  - vv. 21-23 - Regulations against Non-Sexual Contact with the Menstruant
  - v. 24 - Regulations against Sexual Contact with the Menstruant

The first section vv. 19-20 introduces regulations directed to the menstruant. As mentioned earlier, it begins with the unit marker “when or whenever she becomes” (כִּי־תֵהִי) because menstrual flow was inevitable in the lives of women.

The second section vv. 21-24 presents regulations for secondary defilements, which were both non-sexual and sexual in nature.<sup>26</sup>

### *A Literary Analysis of the Text*

After the overview of the text, the paper focuses on the analysis of the text to understand the parameters in which the concept of uncleanness operated in the Jewish cultic system.

#### *15:1-2a*

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: דַּבְּרוּ אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

“And the Lord spoke to the Moses and Aaron saying, speak to the children of Israel...”

Although vv. 1-2a is not part of the pericope under discussion, it introduces the immediate textual context and the initial addressees. Moses and Aaron were to deliver these messages to the children/people of Israel, which includes both genders. Milgrom asserts that the regulations were to be taught to the people so they can diagnose themselves since they concerned the ‘private parts’;<sup>27</sup> no one else can determine that there is indeed a flow or an emission except the menstruant or the man experiencing the seminal emission. It is important to add that the menstruant is not the only focus of the regulation of bodily discharges. The text names the entire population as the secondary

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<sup>26</sup> Since, it is a sub-section does not start with the unit markers but has an unusual marker if (אם) in verse 24 to end the textual unit.

<sup>27</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 906.

addressees because the regulations did not only concern menstruating women but anyone that has the potential of coming in contact with them.

### *Regulations Directly to the Menstruant (vv. 19-20)*

#### A. Specification of Impurity (v. 19a)

Although “the Lord” is not mentioned in the pericope under study, the regulations delivered are still those of the Lord as stated in 15:1, where it states that it is YHWH who specifies the nature of the flow (זָבַח). This gives the regulation a divine sanction and by implication should be taken seriously as binding.

The term “to flow” (זָבַח from the root זָבַח) is normally used to describe Canaan as “a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Exod. 3:8; Deut. 31:20). The basic idea is a movement of liquid, flowing from one location to another.<sup>28</sup> In Lev. 15, however, the term assumes a technical nuance and it is employed to describe bodily discharges. The use of the same term for discharges from both male and female genitalia indicates that the Hebrew text operates with physiological categories that are incompatible with modern medical concepts.<sup>29</sup>

Another specification in the text addresses the source of the flow, which is in her body/flesh (בְּבִשְׂרָהּ). Erberle-Kuster contends that the prepositions conjure up different body images. For the woman, the preposition ‘in’ (בְּ) connotes an interior space, while for the man (Lev. 15:16), the preposition ‘from’ (מִן) stresses separation and externalization, the establishment of distance from the body.<sup>30</sup> The source of the flow as being from the body seems to be of more importance in the text than the gender specification.

The reader is not left wondering about the nature of this flow but is told, using a euphemism “a flow from her flesh” (זָבַח בְּבִשְׂרָהּ), that it is a menstrual flow. Ancient Israelites, like contemporary Ghanaians, resort to the use of euphemisms as a form of censorship on utterances

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<sup>28</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> Erbele-Kuster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus*, 62.

<sup>30</sup> Erbele-Kuster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus*, 65.

that they deem inappropriate. Thus, the discharge is one that ‘flows from within the woman,’ and it is identified as blood.

The consequence is that she will be impure for seven days. The *niddāh* laws are uniquely important because they appear both in the context of ritual-impurity legislation (Lev. 12 and Lev. 15) and in the context of legislation concerning prohibited acts (Lev. 18:19 and Lev. 20).<sup>31</sup> The meaning of the term *niddāh* (impurity) is given based on the consequence of the impurity as a state that will cause her to be “set apart” or “to be excluded.”<sup>32</sup> Milgrom, tracing the etymology of the word, affirms that *niddāh* originally referred to the discharge or elimination of menstrual blood, which came to denote menstrual impurity and impurity in general.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, in rabbinic laws, *niddāh* was used in referring to the menstruant and not just the menstrual blood because she will be excluded from society as a result of her impurity.<sup>34</sup> Erbele-Kuster disagrees with Milgrom in this regard to say that “the meaning of *niddāh* cannot be determined by etymology alone but is only possible through analysis of the contexts in which the word appears.”<sup>35</sup> Hence, she sees *niddāh* as a cultic, socio-religious and pejorative or polemical term, which is evident in its usage only in Leviticus and Numbers.<sup>36</sup> For instance, as a cultic term, *niddāh* signifies the period of separation from the sacred space as a result of the implied impurity. The Hebrew usage of “impurity” limits it to persons that have experienced various forms of bodily discharges but the Greek equivalent *akathartos* has a wider usage to include a description of spaces that are deemed unclean (Lev. 14:45). In speaking of spaces, Douglas avers that the laws of bodily discharges depend on the doctrine of sacred contagion, whereby any contact with the polluted thing will transmit the pollution from contact to contact. The line of dangerous contacts will eventually impinge on sacred food or place.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Rosenberg, “The Conflation of Purity and Prohibition: An Interpretation of Leviticus 18:19,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 4 (2014): 448.

<sup>32</sup> The verb only occurs in the Piel denoting the intense nature of impurity or uncleanness of a menstruating woman.

<sup>33</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 745.

<sup>34</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 745.

<sup>35</sup> Erbele-Kuster, “Gender and Cult,” 381.

<sup>36</sup> Erbele-Kuster, “Gender and Cult,” 381.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 187.

The text also indicates that the duration of the *niddāh* is seven days, which probably is connected with the duration of the menstrual flow. However, Erbele-Kuster argues that it is only the dangerous situation created by the bleeding that lasted for seven days and not necessarily the bleeding itself.<sup>38</sup> She is right in reasoning on this tangent because cultic impurity can arise independently from concrete material impurities, even after the bleeding has stopped so the regulation designates ‘buffer’ days to ensure that the menstruant is completely clean.

## B. Transfer of Impurity and Impurity Regulations (vv. 19b-24)

Verses 19b-24 outline regulations regarding a woman’s impurity to prevent others from coming in contact with her.

### *Regulation 1* (v. 19b)

וְכָל־הַנִּגַּע בָּהּ יִטְמָא עַד־הָעֶרֶב:

“...and everything that touches her will be unclean until the evening.”

This first regulation uses the conjunction ‘all’, ‘every’ (כָּל) which can refer to all or every object or person. However, ‘touches’ (נִגַּע) limits this list to persons that are capable of touching her body, precisely, males. On the other hand, the Hebrew language can refer to the masculine gender in generic terms, which would include every human or object who consequently remains unclean (*tāmē’*) until the evening of that particular day. Kimuhu lists *tāmē’* as one of the Hebrew words that function as taboo markers, especially ritual taboos and its verbal form expresses the process of communicable impurity.<sup>39</sup> In other words, *tāmē’* is used in cases of separation where a person or even an object has the potential of becoming contaminated by another person or object.<sup>40</sup> *Tāmē’* is, therefore, the result of the state of *niddāh*. The menstruant is already in the state of *niddāh* and cannot herself become unclean as the word *tāmē’* implies. Rather, it is the woman’s *niddāh* state that renders others unclean.

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<sup>38</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 387.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson M. Kimuhu, *Leviticus: The Priestly Laws and Prohibitions from the Perspectives of Ancient Near East and Africa* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 330; Kimuhu adds that טָמֵא belongs to the same semantic field as שָׂקָץ and שִׂקִּיץ, “abomination,” נִדָּה sexual uncleanness, תּוֹעֵבָה “abomination,” and פֶּגֶל “sacrificial flesh not fit to eat.”

<sup>40</sup> Lance Hawley, “The Agenda of Priestly Taxonomy: טָמֵא and שָׂקָץ in Leviticus 11,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (April 2015): 236.

It is not clearly stated in this first regulation that the menstruant was not expected to be quarantined during her period of impurity but was allowed to be within the general population; people are only made aware of the possibilities of contamination. The menstruant is passive while the regulations are directed to the people who might come in contact with her.

Generally, the regulation concerning menstruation seems to be more elaborate in comparison to that of the seminal emission. Based on a comparative analysis of the two pericopes that deal with normal bodily discharges of men and women (Lev. 15:16-18; 19-24), it is seen that the responsibility of remaining ceremonially pure is placed on the man as he is tasked to bathe and wash his clothing. It is only in the case of sexual intercourse (verse 18), that man and woman involved are made responsible for their cleansing. On the contrary, during the woman's menstruation, the law makes her the object of fear. Just after the introduction of the prohibition, the law cautions "anyone who touches her;" this syntagm is used four times in the pericope and may function as a boundary marker, making the woman a taboo. Furthermore, she is not given full responsibility for remaining pure by herself hence, her state of purity or impurity depends on potential contacts.

This disparity as illustrated is not based on biological differences but corroborates the patriarchal nature of Jewish laws as seen in the Hebrew Bible, a situation that indicates the extent of stereotyped role differentiation, which is gender-based and gender-biased.<sup>41</sup> To state emphatically, she is being discriminated against only because she is a woman.

*Regulation 2 (v. 20a)*

וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁכַּב עָלֶיהָ בְּנִדְתָּהּ יִטְמָא

"And everything that she will lie upon in her impurity will become unclean."

The second regulation focuses on what the menstruant lies upon (שָׁכַב) which indicates that she is impure even in her resting state. This is the

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<sup>41</sup> M. H. Maltz, "The Jewish View of Women: Gender-Based and Gender-Biased," *Journal for Semitics* 5, no. 2 (1993): 192.

only time that *niddāh* and *tāmē'* are both used as taboo markers, which would indicate an emphasis on the woman's unclean period.<sup>42</sup>

The writer of Leviticus hardly uses 'to lay' (שָׁבַב) in the literal sense in this context. In several texts, it is used figuratively as in verse 24 as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Closely related to 'to lay' is 'to sit' (יָשַׁב) as mentioned in the next regulation. Like in regulation 3, the particle 'all' or 'every' is used to indicate that there is no specific object that can be contaminated but every object will be contaminated by contact. It is observed that there is no mention of what the man lies or sits on during the time of the emission as compared to that of the woman. The only hint as to what the man may sit on is the mention of skin or leather (עוֹר) probably of a saddle.

### *Regulation 3 (v. 20b)*

וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-יִתְשַׁב עָלָיו יִטְמָא:

“...and also everything that she sits upon will be unclean.”

This regulation has to do with everything that the menstruant sits upon (יָשַׁב 'she sits' from the root יָשַׁב 'to sit'). Milgrom explains that the list of defilable objects is limited to bedding and chairs.<sup>43</sup> A thought that implies that the menstruant is limited to her bed or chairs and is not expected to move around freely in order not to render other furniture unclean.

Some scholars underline the discrimination against women while others do not. My position is that discrimination is present in the text; as mentioned above, the types of contact through which the discharging male and the menstruating female contaminate other persons or things are expressed through the verbs lie (vv. 4, 20, 26), sit (vv. 4, 6, 22, 23), touch (vv. 10, 12, 21), and spit (v. 8), the last being used only for the male.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Erbele-Kuster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus*, 67.

<sup>43</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 937.

<sup>44</sup> Erbele-Kuster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus*, 68.

*Regulations for Secondary Defilement (vv. 21-24)*

A. Regulations against Non-Sexual Contact with the Menstruant (vv. 21-23)

*Regulation 4 (v. 21)*

וְכֹל־הַנִּגַּע בַּמִּשְׁכָּבָה וְכִבְּס בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֵץ בַּמַּיִם וְטָמֵא עַד־הָעֶרֶב:

“...and anyone who touches her bed will wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and will be unclean until the evening.”

This regulation builds on the second regulation. As a result of the contact, the person is required to wash (כָּבַס) his clothes and bathe (רַחֵץ) with water yet, remain unclean till evening. Milgrom argues that it is needless to assume that the clothes of the person who came into contact with the menstruant also came into contact with the bed when he touched it. Rather, it is the impurity transferred to the bed while the menstruant slept in it that is conveyed to the clothing via the body.<sup>45</sup> So Rosenberg identifies this kind of impurity as a ritual impurity, which affects the ritual status of persons stricken by it and leads to the defilement of people and objects, limiting their interaction with those things defined as sacred.<sup>46</sup> This regulation has a ritual attached to it unlike the previous regulations, which is addressed to “anyone who touches her bed.” Thereby making the bed assume an impure state just like the menstruant.

*Regulation 5 (v. 22)*

וְכֹל־הַנִּגַּע בְּכֹל־כֵּלֵי אֲשֶׁר־תִּשָּׁבַע עָלָיו וְכִבְּס בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֵץ בַּמַּיִם וְטָמֵא עַד־הָעֶרֶב:

“Anyone who touches any utensil on which she sits upon will wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and become unclean until the evening.”

It has already been established in Regulation 3 that whatever she sits on is unclean. So this regulation, just like the previous one, indicates the transference of her unclean state unto whoever touches her seat. In this case, also the person washes his/her clothing and bathes in water, yet is still unclean until the evening.

<sup>45</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 938.

<sup>46</sup> Rosenberg, “The Conflation of Purity and Prohibition,” 450.

Verse 23 does not mention a new regulation but informs the reader of the identification of “whatever she sits upon.” It could be a bed or anything else that the menstruant sat upon, which is reminiscent of Rachel’s story where both the camel she sat on and the gods became unclean (Gen. 31:34). The verse also functions as an emphasis since these regulations have already been mentioned in verses 21 and 22.

## B. Regulations against Sexual Contact with the Menstruant (v. 24)

### *Regulation 6 (v. 24)*

וְאִם שָׁכַב יִשְׁכַּב אִישׁ אִתָּהּ וַתְּהִי נִדְתָּהּ עָלָיו וְטָמֵא שִׁבְעָתַיִם  
וְכָל־הַמִּשְׁכָּב אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׁכַּב עָלָיו וְטָמֵא:

“And if a man lies with her so that her impurity comes upon him, he will be unclean for seven days and every bed which he lies upon will be unclean.”

This is the second time that another person is mentioned as a primary ‘victim’ of the woman’s impurity. ‘To lay’ (שָׁכַב) is a euphemism for sexual relations, so this is not a mere action of lying in bed. The text provides no clue as to whether this was a deliberate act, or the man accidentally or unknowingly had sexual intercourse with the menstruant. If, however, he knowingly had sexual intercourse with the menstruant then both of them will be excommunicated from the society based on the regulation of Lev. 20:18. So it appears that this would be an accidental contact.

In addition, the infinitive absolute ‘laying’ (שָׁכַב) is used to emphasize the verbal idea, which makes it clear that sexual intercourse during menstruation is strongly prohibited and the sanctions are made clear. The logic of v. 23, among other considerations, suggests that the man himself can then also communicate impurity. He becomes a primary source of impurity, and we can assume that the same rules apply to him as to the menstruating woman.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, the man can transfer that impurity onto any bed that he lies in, hence, he takes on every penalty of impurity that is stated in vv. 19-23. The man is hereby cautioned of the dire consequences of having sexual intercourse with a woman during her menstruation.

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<sup>47</sup> Erbele-Kuster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus*, 72.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that Israelites were commanded to separate themselves from any uncleanness in order not to pollute the sacred space. The text was a product of the patriarchal culture of Ancient Israel and so it exposes the cultural prejudice present in that context. On the positive side, the Israelite women used their period of menstruation to rest from work.<sup>48</sup>

It is, however, important to understand the meaning of the text in the large context of the book of Leviticus. The focus of the book is the call to be holy as YHWH is holy (11:45; 19:2; 20:26); all the laws about purity and impurity represent an educative tool to learn how to live in His presence and how to become a sign of His holiness. This is possible because every person, woman and man alike, is created as an “image and likeness of God,” (Gen. 1:27), the only ‘sacred space’ in which He wants to be recognised and worshipped.

From this ontological truth, the text can be read as a call to recognise the ‘human body’ as a ‘sacred space.’ Even though not fully developed in the First Testament, this concept becomes central in the New Testament and can offer a path of transformation for the Ghanaian culture.

### **Engagement of the Text with the Ghanaian Reality**

The engagement between the culture of the text and that of Ghana is essential to understand the effects of menstrual taboos and implied impurity on the lived experiences of women. The engagement aimed also at using the biblical text to challenge and transform the cultural reality of Ghana.

The literary analysis of the text revealed that in Ancient Israel menstruation, which should be a natural state, renders the woman unclean and by that makes her a contaminant. Therefore, she becomes a taboo to the community and is required to remove herself completely from

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<sup>48</sup> In the Jewish context, the *mikveh* is considered a safe space for women after their period of menstruation or impurity, but there are mixed reactions concerning its relevance. The conservatives see the *mikveh* as a ritual pool where women immerse themselves and come out pure and empowered, yet the liberals deem it patriarchal and oppressive, claiming that the *niddah* itself reflects a slave theology. Cf. Susan Grossman, “The Mikveh and the Sanctity of Being Created Human,” in *Hakol Kol Yakov* Robert A. Harris and Jonathan S. Milgram ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 68-70; Beth Wenger, “Mikveh,” *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/mikveh#pid-13876> [Accessed October 31, 2022]

the public in order not to contaminate others. Her private life is also affected since her beddings and whatever she sits on are considered ‘contaminated.’

The menstruating woman’s relationship with her husband is greatly affected in that any contact with him whether sexual or non-sexual, renders him impure and hence a contaminant. As a result, every regulation that rendered the woman unclean can in turn render the man unclean. She thus becomes abhorrent to society.

Lev. 15:19-24 shows that the woman’s period of impurity results in a social separation, a situation similar to what Ghanaian girls experience. The text, therefore, reveals to the readers the grim, distressing, and unhealthy situation that every woman within menstruating age finds herself in because of the stigma and shame attached to menstruation.

The text, however, challenges the Ghanaian Christian community to be aware of the cultural root of the biblical texts and of the progressive journey that Israel did with her God towards a better understanding of His holiness. Walking with YHWH, the people reflect on their own identity as the ‘image and likeness’ of the Holy God (Gen. 1:27; Lev. 19:19) and on the testimonial value of their ‘being’ the chosen people. In the fullness of time, the Word became flesh (John 1:14); Jesus overcame the limit of his own culture, through words and action, to reveal the original will of the Father. He touched lepers and ate with sinners; in his encounter with a woman with a twelve-year-long haemorrhage, Jesus, being fully aware of the Levitical purity law, did not rebuke the woman for touching him. Rather, he encouraged her, called her ‘daughter,’ and commended her for her faith: “Courage, my daughter, your faith has saved you” (Matt. 9:22; cf. Mark 5:34; Luke 8:48).

Like Jesus, Ghanaian Christian communities need to challenge cultural practices that restrict women’s movement in cult, society, and the home, to promote an open dialogue to address health issues which affect women.<sup>49</sup> They should advocate to eliminate any taboo that limit the full development of women and girls and do not uphold their dignity as ‘daughters of God.’

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<sup>49</sup> Selvidge, “Mark 5:23-24,” 619.

Furthermore, if in Ancient Israel an important purpose of the purity regulations was to ensure the holiness of the sacred space (Lev. 15:31), this cannot be accepted in a Christian context where the temple is identified with the crucified body of Jesus (John 2:19-21), “the greater and perfect tent not made with hands, that is, not of this creation” (Heb. 9:11b).

Uncleanness, therefore, does not derive from a biological phenomenon but from any form of discrimination against the ‘image and likeness’ of God that every human being is. Ghanaian churches are, therefore, called to educate to compassion and not fear. Compassion for the many girls whose health has been affected negatively as a consequence of misunderstood Scripture and furtherance of harmful cultural practices because, as Gatti and Ossom-Batsa affirm, “transformation resides in the change of perspective.”<sup>50</sup>

A new perspective and understanding are indeed needed in knowing that what God has created cannot render the physical sacred space impure. The focus of the church should be on the ‘new’ sacred space, which is the human body (1 Cor. 6:19). Therefore, purity requires keeping the body of both men and women ‘holy;’ caring for the body implies also personal hygiene for the benefit of the person, but entails above all to create an inclusive environment, free from any form of discrimination perpetuated by cultural traditions that are not only anachronistic but harmful and in contrast with the Gospel’s message.

## Conclusion

The exegetical analysis revealed that the Bible and its interpretation embody both a divine and a human perspective with respect to women and their role in the religious and social community.<sup>51</sup> As any other biblical text, Lev. 15:19-24 is socio-culturally conditioned; it embraces a human perspective as well as a liberating divine perspective.

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<sup>50</sup> Nicoletta Gatti and George Ossom-Batsa, “The Drama of Infertility: Reading Isaiah 56:1-8 from a Krobo Perspective,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 40 (2018): 137.

<sup>51</sup> Teresa Okure, “Women in the Bible,” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 52.

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The divine perspective underlines the ontological identity of every human being, women and man alike, as ‘image and likeness of God’ (Gen. 1:27), which every Ghanaian Christian community is invited to embrace and promote.

Our communities should be places of education. Girls should be encouraged to open and free speech that would improve safe menstrual health and hygiene. Medical personnel and teachers should be available to offer correct information on menstrual hygiene and healthy practices, avoiding euphemisms and negative language in referring to menstruation.

Furthermore, Christian communities should support the ongoing debate concerning the removal of tax on sanitary products to make them affordable for young girls; they should also provide a safe environment and the necessary support through the provision of proper washrooms in churches, schools, and public spaces for women.

The right understanding of Scripture, hopefully, will bring about the healing that so many girls and women in Ghanaian churches and society desire. The ‘uncleanness of menstruation’ is, therefore, a misnomer since menstruation is part of the physiology of women and it is functional to the generation of new life. Thus, it should be celebrated and not ‘feared’!

*Emem Opoku-Agyemang*

eopoku-agyemang003@st.ug.edu.gh  
Dept. for the Study of Religions  
University of Ghana