

Is Sexuality Impure? An Alternative Interpretation of Leviticus 15:18

René Gehring
Pastor
Bogenhofen, Austria

Introduction

When investigating the biblical theology of sexuality, there is one verse that seemingly mars the overall positive biblical attitude towards sexuality—the supposed impurity attached to legal sexual intercourse according to Lev 15:18.¹ Wenham admits that “the law in Lev 15:18 [...] is one of the

¹ This “impurity” means a ritual defilement, incurred through different circumstances, such as “birth, menstruation, bodily emissions, ‘leprosy,’ [...] and contact with death.” (TWOT s.v. טָמֵא; cf. e.g. Lev 11-15 as the chapters most clearly concerned with these kinds of “impurity.” See Francis Brown and others, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (=BDB). With an Appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic*. Digital 2001 ed., Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1906 s.v. טָמֵא for more texts.) This defilement frequently led to individual social exclusion as long as the uncleanness would exist (cf. Lev 13:46; 15:25.31; Num 12:15), mostly until evening (see Lev 11: passim); especially the holy precinct was not to be entered by ritually impure persons (cf. Lev 15:31). This uncleanness has, basically, nothing to do with sinfulness, but rather with a state of being “contaminated” by the realm of death (loss of blood, loss of semen, leprosy, carrion etc.)! Cf. also e.g. William L. Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 25-29. The three major aspects of ritual impurity may be summarized as follows: “(1) The sources of ritual impurity are generally natural and more or less unavoidable. (2) It is not sinful to contact these impurities. And (3) these impurities convey an impermanent contagion.” (Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23.) These points apply to the situation examined in this article. Point (1) is of special importance, for sexual intercourse would be avoidable—not so the unintended discharges Lev 15 is generally dealing with (more on this, of course, below).

most puzzling in the OT. It seems to run counter to the whole tenor of biblical morality.”² While sexuality in a protected (monogamous, marital) context is depicted as something very positive throughout the bible, and even as the constituting feature of the divinely ordained institution of marriage (Gen 2:24: “becoming one flesh”), this verse in Lev 15 tends to lead the reader to conclude that sexuality renders one ritually unclean and, therefore, is somehow impure even within a licit, monogamous, marital context. This further results, consequently, in a negative connotation regarding those Old Testament metaphors that deal with the same intimacy between Yahweh and Israel, as well as the NT passages dealing figuratively with the Edenic intimacy between Jesus and his followers (1 Cor 6:16f.; Eph 5:31f.; both echoing Gen 2:24).

It also contains unfortunate implications on the Seventh-day Adventist theology of sexuality, which in general is a very sound and positive one. While the negative interpretation of Ps 51:5 (“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me”) is rejected and interpreted as not pertaining to sexuality *per se*, but to the general sinful state of post-Fall human nature, Lev 15:18 still remains a problem to be solved—given that the overall positive biblical “attitude” towards sexuality is presupposed as a persistent, permanent basis of the biblical theology of sexuality.

The purpose of this article is to support the harmony of the biblical teaching in this respect by a thorough investigation of that verse, its context, and its linguistic features, leading to an alternative and, in my view, more adequate interpretation. This may aid scholars to find a proper explanation for the problems the currently prevailing understanding of Lev 15:18 evokes.

The investigation commences with a brief review of the ancient Jewish interpretations of Philo, Josephus, and the few Rabbinic notes on this instance. Then, current scholarly interpretations and a non-defiling alternative of Lev 15:18 and related Old Testament texts will be presented. Finally, adequate conclusions can be drawn from the findings.

² Gordon J. Wenham, “Why does Sexual Intercourse defile (Lev 15:18)?,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95 (1983): 432.

Philo, Josephus, and Ancient Rabbinic Notes

Philo. Apart from some instances dealing with the institution of marriage in general, Philo did not write very much about the concrete conjugal (sexual) act. That makes it difficult to get reliable information as background of his perception of Lev 15:18. However, there are some hints about his categories of “pure” and “impure” in connection to sexuality that might be valuable.

In *Det.* 102, for instance, he calls only that kind of sexuality “impure” (οὐκ εὐαγεῖς) which is not according to the Jewish law and the purpose of multiplying, thus following the biblical pattern in Lev 18. In the same way he denounces the ancient Sodomites of indulging in “strange/unnatural and impious desires” (ἐκφύλουκαὶ ἀσεβοῦς ἐπιθυμίας) when intending to rape the male guests of Lot (*Fug.* 144). Again, when referring to the temptation of young Josephus in Egypt, he speaks about “impurity”³ only in connection with extramarital and therefore illegitimate sexuality (*Ios.* 44). When speaking about the Ten Commandments, he particularly dwells on further elucidations of the commandment against adultery and thereby refers again to the Mosaic laws as the legitimate instance to declare pure and impure sexual associations (*Spec.* 3:8-82). On the other hand, Philo speaks with respect and honor of having sexual intercourse with one’s wife when being confident that the seed will not be shed in vain.⁴ Finally, in *Spec.* 3:63 he apparently refers briefly to Lev 15:18, giving a quite clear description of his understanding, albeit devoid of any explanation as to the underlying sense:

³ Here in *Ios.* 44 the antonym καθαρεύω is employed to demonstrate the opposite (lawful) behavior.

⁴ *Spec.* 3:33: “But if the menstruation ceases, he may boldly sow the generative seeds, no longer fearing that what he lays will perish.” The Greek verb employed for “boldly” is θαρσέω and even means “to be cheerful/courageous” (cf. Henry George Liddell and others, *A Greek-English Lexicon (=LSJ)*, 9th rev. ed., Oxford/New York: Clarendon Press / Oxford University Press, 1996 s.v. θαρσέω, and Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature (=BDAG)*. 3rd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 s.v. θαρσέω). Philo obviously tries to encourage husbands to have intercourse with their wives—as long as the purpose of procreation is kept in mind and temperance is maintained.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

So careful is the law to provide against the introduction of violent changes in the institution of marriage that a husband and wife, who have intercourse in accordance with the legitimate usages of married life, are not allowed, when they leave their bed, to touch anything until they have made their ablutions and purged themselves with water.

Evidently, Philo understands even legitimate intercourse as defiling. Although he generally recognizes different categories of pure and impure sexuality depending on their biblical lawfulness, at this place he interrupts this schematization to interpret (certainly the text of) Lev 15:18 as referring to sexual intercourse, again consequently applying his dualistic morality in order to declare even lawful sexuality to be impure—certainly due to the pleasures involved.

Josephus. Proceeding to the second witness of the well-educated representatives of ancient (first century) Judaism, one notices that Josephus clearly, but somehow incidentally, refers to Lev 15:16-18, explaining that he recognizes two ways of a possible defilement: (1) nocturnal emission (corresponding to Lev 15:16f.) and (2) legal, conjugal intercourse (v. 18): “In view of the sacrifices, the law has decreed purifications [... after what sometimes happens to us in bed,] after sexual union with a woman, and from many other causes [...].”⁵ Shortly hereafter he refers again to v. 18 and elucidates the deeper meaning of the impurity. He apparently understands it as defiling in a moral way:

Moreover, the law enjoins, that after the man and wife have lain together in a regular way, they shall bathe themselves; for there is a defilement contracted thereby, both in soul and body, as if they had gone into another country; for indeed the soul, by being united to the body, is subject to miseries, and is not freed therefrom again but by death; on which account the law requires this purification to be entirely performed.⁶

⁵ *C.Ap.* 2:198; the addition in square brackets renders the translation of Greek ἀπὸ λέχου as presented in Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (New York: W. Borradaile, 1828); Barclay translates “after childbirth” (cf. Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, ed. Steve Mason, trans. John M. G. Barclay. Flavius Josephus. Translation and Commentary (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2007), 281).

⁶ *C.Ap.* 2:203 according to the translation of Whiston. Mason renders differently: “It [i.e., the law] gave instruction to wash also after the lawful intercourse of a man and woman; for it supposed that this constitutes a division of the soul (as it passes) into another place. For

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

Obviously he understood Lev 15:18 as referring to legal sexual intercourse as an element of ritual impurity and defilement.⁷ While uniting with the body during sexual intercourse, the soul is apparently “suffering miseries” (κακοπαθέω) and can only by death (θάνατος) be freed from it. These assumptions need a closer investigation.

First we have to recognize that he does not interpret the defilement in the same way many scholars nowadays tend to explain it. There is a huge difference in the basis of the rationale and they are not agreeing although the general tenor is sounding very similar, namely: that conjugal intercourse defiles and that this is the meaning of Lev 15:18. While modern scholars widely agree in perceiving some kind of inherent uncleanness in the legal sexual act itself (whatever it may come from), Josephus is in no way approving of any scholarly explanation given today. He refers to a *moral* problem, basing on the pleasure of the act and the resulting debasement of the soul. The problem for Josephus is not so much the sexual act itself and possibly the “life liquids”⁸ that are shed thereby, but the pleasure that is unfortunately indulged in. Furthermore, he approves of legal, conjugal intercourse only for the purpose of procreation and even describes it as “fornication” to have sexual intercourse without the purpose of begetting children (see *C.Ap.* 2:199.202).⁹ So he continues to explicate

the soul suffers when it is implanted in bodies and again when it is separated from them at death. Hence it ordered purifications in all such cases.” He rather emphasizes the soul’s suffering by imparting a part of one’s own soul into a new body (the embryo) through the male semen (cf. Josephus, *Against Apion*, 286 / fn.817). Cf. on the defilement through sex also *A.J.* 3:263; *Spec.* 3:32.

⁷ That is reaffirmed in *A.J.* 6:235: “He [i.e., king Saul] saw David’s seat was empty, but said nothing, supposing that he had not purified himself since he had accompanied with his wife, and so could not be present.”

⁸ Thus argued by Wenham, “Why does,” 434 and followed by many commentators.

⁹ The original Greek phrase (§ 202) reads: τις ἐπὶ λέχους φθορὰν παρέλθοι καθαρὸς εἶναι τότε προσήκει, and means even more: “If someone thus [avoiding procreation] corrupts the marriage bed, the cleanness [of the marital intercourse] passes away.” In other words: Such a corruption of the marital intercourse, as to have sex without the purpose of begetting children, is to defile licit intercourse and that finally makes it sinful in God’s eyes. Just taking this instance into account could possibly mean that, consequently, sexuality in order to procreate is not defiling. However, his other statements do not clearly support this view; but at least it may be a small hint to better understand his position and intention. Please notice the contrary position presented in Heb 13:4 (“The marriage relation is completely honorable, and the marriage-bed [i.e., sexuality] is pure/undefiled [...]”—a text

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

that men should always govern their desire (κρατεῖν δὲ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας; *A.J.* 4:244), for it is bad to marry with lustful passion (ἐξ ἐπιθυμίας; *A.J.* 4:245). Apparently, the pleasure of sexuality is the (*morally*) defiling element even when practiced only within the “legal” bonds of the wedlock. The only pure and lawful aspect seems to be derived from the purpose to procreate, and just that is the reason for the marriage relation and sexuality at all. However, the way to father those children is defiling and it seems like God obviously made a mistake in connecting pleasure with the act necessary for multiplying. Moreover he is somehow guilty of this defilement, for he even commands that humans should procreate (cf. Gen 1:28).

It is not surprising that Josephus even equates the one who “secretes semen in his sleep” with men “who have sexual relations with a woman in accordance with law [κατὰ νόμον]” (*A.J.* 3:263). While this clearly debases the intimate partnership spouses experience through licit sexual intercourse, he emphasizes, on the other hand, the importance of an affectionate conduct of husbands toward their wives (*A.J.* 4:258; *C. Ap.* 2:201). He endeavors to protect the wives and to urge the husbands to treat their spouses with respect and loving care, but sexuality apparently does not fit that ideal. In his view it seems to be always some kind of an egoistic act, abusing soul and body, defiling both, making the whole creature impure.

Altogether it is not a very happy picture that Josephus is drawing of sexuality in general. On the one hand he knows some sort of “legal” relationship that is founded by God in Eden. But on the other hand he clearly points out that conjugal intercourse is only to be practiced to father children, never just for pleasure. And even though the purpose may be “good” by wishing to get children and by behaving decently in every way, yet it defiles the soul which consequently has to be cleansed in order to extinguish the “miseries.”

Rabbinic Notes. Concerning the earliest rabbinic notes, the documents we possess today are not older than approximately 200 AD. These are the Sifra as the halakhic interpretation (Midrash) of the book of Leviticus and the Mishnaic tractates, later followed by the Talmudic documents (Mishnah including the traditional Gemara) around 425 AD (the Palestinian or

that will shortly be dealt with at the end of this study.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

Jerusalem Talmud) and 550 AD (the Babylonian Talmud). It is hardly possible to date the development of special content exactly, albeit we can be certain that some portions reach back until the time before the emergence of rabbinic Judaism that came up after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD. While the date of the ordinances' origin cannot be determined exactly, we nevertheless have to consider that they reflect mainly the Pharisaic part of ancient Jewish halakha. Some influences of the other ancient Jewish religious parties may have been absorbed in the process of establishing rabbinic schools and a firmer, common Jewish doctrine; but the mainstream is, most likely, still somehow Pharisaic in its substance.

The Mishnah has a complete Seder in which all impurities are dealt with: Toharot. Within this major section there are two tractates particularly dealing with genital discharges and the impurities they produce: Zabim and Nidda. While Nidda deals with (generally usual) female discharges, Zabim speaks about (unusual) male outflows, but also includes some more instructions concerning female discharges. As is generally well known, the Mishnah is very scrupulous in declaring most exactly what has how long to be regarded as unclean and which rites are to be performed. So it is all the more interesting that there is no clear allusion given concerning the impurity caused by legal, sexual intercourse. The existing ordinances are only dealing with different discharges, their contamination and what becomes in which way unclean. So, for instance, one is only rendered unclean by contamination of semen if it is still wet (*Nidda* 7:1) and being on the same ship with an unclean person is sufficient to defile (*Zabim* 3:1). It is meaningful that the tractate *Zabim* only deals with unusual male discharges outside of sexual intercourse. So even when it is declaring semen to be generally defiling (*Zabim* 5:10), we may assume that a morbid discharge or a nocturnal emission is meant. Only "pollution" (of nocturnal, unintended emission) is declared to be unclean (*Zabim* 5:11), there is nowhere a clear, unambiguous reference to the impurity of usual sexual intercourse.

The Sifra, however, points out that the defiling element in Lev 15:18 is the act of intercourse, not the semen that is shed.¹⁰ While that seems to

¹⁰ Cf. the Sifra on Lev 15:18; see also Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality. The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 59.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

contradict the immediate context and—as is to be demonstrated below—the content and direction of the entire chapter, Maccoby tries to combine the prevailing scholarly opinion of the defiling semen with this rabbinical view and explains:

The rabbis concluded, therefore, that this was “a decree of the King,” for which no human rationale could be found. The rabbis also considered the argument that, since semen was not the cause of the woman’s uncleanness, she ought to be made unclean even by intercourse when no semen was emitted (Sifra). They admitted that this would indeed be a logical conclusion, but it was ruled out by the wording of the text, “And a woman with whom a man lies with emission of seed (*shikhat zer’a*)—they shall bathe in water and be unclean until the evening” (Lev 15:18). Thus the presence of semen is necessary, even though it is not the semen that causes her uncleanness. Her uncleanness is caused by the sexual act, not by the semen, but the sexual act must be a complete one. This is a typical rabbinic argument, in which an apparently redundant phrase is given legal significance, and shown to be necessary in order to counter a logical train of reasoning that would otherwise have been unanswerable.¹¹

The explanation that the crucial text in Lev 15:18 simply is “a decree of the king” in order to abandon any further elucidation and resulting debates appears too simplistic and is not helpful for a solid exegesis of this text. But it clearly demonstrates that even the ancient rabbis who were so scrupulous to find possible impurities and adequate purifications had no reasonable rationale for the text of Lev 15:18.¹² Thus they share the problems of ancient writers like Philo and Josephus as well as the challenges of present scholarly research.

Conclusions. What we finally gained for our investigation of Lev 15:18 is twofold: The general attitude of both well-educated Jewish representatives, Philo and Josephus, is dominated by a strong dualism between body and soul. As Josephus describes it, the soul can only by death

¹¹ Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 59. On the problems of the Sifra’s illogical argumentation see also *ibid.*, 59f. and Jacob Neusner, *Uniting the Dual Torah. Sifra and Problem of the Mishnah* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), *passim*.

¹² At least I could not find any further hints at that text or concerning actual practice dealing with ritual sexual impurity within the rabbinic literature.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

(!) be freed from the miseries resulting from the bodily pleasures even of lawful sexual activities. Thus, we cannot expect any good reputation of conjugal intercourse, even though it may serve procreation. The reason why God so inherently linked pleasure with the Edenic instruction to beget children (Gen 1:28) remains unexplained by both authors. They seem to be led by their surrounding intellectual environment, influenced by Hellenistic perceptions like those of Pythagoras and Plato who deeply formed the dualistic attitudes that are very soon found even in Christian thinking and practice.—Not to forget the inner Jewish advocates of a very ascetic way of life that has been gloriously described by both authors as the highest sense and essence of philosophic Judaism: the Essenes. Furthermore, especially Josephus wrote primarily for educated Romans, rather than for Jews; consequently one must assume that he expressed Judaism in a way intelligible to Roman readers, perhaps describing the facts he was dealing with in a more offensive light.

But one has to acknowledge that Josephus and Philo might reflect some typical Jewish custom of bathing after conjugal intercourse due to some supposed defilement. What we do not know is the source of their perception and the Jewish group(s) they are referring to. Since there has been a great variety of belief and practice in their time, we cannot simply assume that they are speaking of Judaism in general, although their testimony is, of course, valuable to comprehend the “atmosphere” and halakhic streams of Judaism in their time.¹³ We have to consider that important and influential groups like the Pharisees and Essenes had many special regulations about purifications and were concerned of impurity where there would be no biblical (Mosaic) ordinance given to denounce some contact or action to be defiling.¹⁴

The second important aspect that is to be recognized is a result of the first one. We can see that neither Philo nor Josephus support the recent scholarly explanations of the supposed ritual impurity in Lev 15:18. Although both interpret it as the same fact (conjugal intercourse), the rationales for this perplexing statement about defilement are differing

¹³ While e.g. Josephus glorifies the Essenes, he seems to orientate himself on the sect of the Pharisees (*Vita* 12). And Philo, while highly esteeming the Therapeutae (cf. *Contempl. passim*), obviously was not partaking in their way of life (cf. *Spec.* 3:3).

¹⁴ Cf. on these over careful practices e.g. Mark 7:2-9 (Pharisees); *B.J.* 2:150 (Essenes).

widely and the basic assumptions regarding sexuality *per se* are also completely different and widely contradicted and opposed by today's theologians. Regarding Philo in particular, we even witness that he mainly denounces that sexuality of being "impure" or "polluted" which is not according to the Jewish laws or the purpose of procreation. Especially the last matter might be important for our investigation. Since the purpose of (legitimate) procreation is only maintained when having normal, conjugal intercourse, Philo must have understood the "pollution" of Lev 15:16f. as deviating from that divine principle, while Lev 15:18 (if understood as referring to sexual intercourse) meets the divine requirements in the "purest" way—but unfortunately defiling corresponding to the bodily pleasure that is (in both author's perception) always disturbing spirituality. So his understanding of the impurity in Lev 15:18 must be the same as Josephus', namely: some kind of a *moral* defilement. But that is not only deviating from recent scholarly attitudes, but it is evidently completely contradicting the overall perception regarding sexuality that is widely shared by theologians today—and it runs counter to the context of the entire chapter Lev 15, which is not dealing with moral failures, but exclusively with ritual (im-)purity. Josephus and Philo, therefore, cannot serve as a positive affirmation of recent scholarly explanations as far as the general perception and the rationale for the defilement is concerned.

Besides, the problems which Philo, Josephus and the ancient rabbis encounter when maintaining the ideal of multiplying according to the Edenic command (Gen 1:28) and at the same time declaring the necessary sexual act as defiling, is very similar to the problems commentators are facing nowadays when trying to explain this antagonism and the resulting tensions, although the respective rationales and the types of defilement are differing. While these ancient sources clearly demonstrate that the perception of the impurity even of legal sexuality has a long history, it unfortunately does not help us in the purpose of explaining Lev 15:18 and finding a satisfying answer for its supposed impurity. Moreover we notice that even the ancient Rabbinic interpreters had no idea (not even a speculative one) of the intention Yahweh might have had with the precept in Lev 15:18, and thus, naturally, they have been prone to conclude following their own cultural patterns or simply by interrupting any discussion with reference to God's impenetrable omniscience.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

Current Interpretations of Lev 15:18 and a Non-Defiling Alternative

Now it is necessary to take a closer look at recent investigation and argumentation regarding Lev 15:18, thereby establishing an alternative and, in my view, more adequate understanding of this law. Besides this central text there are two other instances that seem to be connected with it—or at least with the impurity attached to sexuality supposedly spoken of in this verse—namely: Exod 19:14f. and 1 Sam 21:4f. Since Lev 15:18 mostly represents the interpretative basis for the other instances that are sometimes viewed as connoting sexual impurity, the following investigation commences with Lev 15:18 and its context, before proceeding to the examination of the few other hints. The main thesis that will be argued is that the text does not speak about sexuality at all, but – as context, structure and other literary features suggests—that it deals with unintended, uncontrollable nocturnal emission of a man who thereby contaminates a woman lying next to him, without any intended, controllable, mutual sexual activity.

To begin with, standard Bible versions such as the NASB usually translate Lev 15:16-18 as follows:

¹⁶Now if a man has a seminal emission, he shall bathe all his body in water and be unclean until evening. ¹⁷As for any garment or any leather on which there is seminal emission, it shall be washed with water and be unclean until evening. ¹⁸If a man lies with a woman so that there is a seminal emission, they shall both bathe in water and be unclean until evening.

This English translation gives no direct connection of the last sentence (v. 18) to vv. 16f., and seems to imply a seminal emission due to normal sexual intercourse with one's wife, at least if one assumes that "to lie with a woman" is to be understood as a sexual relation.¹⁵ But scrutinizing the Hebrew text closer makes one recognize that there is no break between the given sections (vv. 16f. and v. 18). Even Milgrom, who holds that vv. 18 and 24 refer to sexual intercourse,¹⁶ asserts that

¹⁵ Similarly Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus. The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia/New York/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 96.

¹⁶ See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 904.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the second half of the chapter dealing with discharges from women begins not here [v. 18] but in the next verse. The proof is found in the absence of the relative conjunction *ki*, which would be expected if the verse began a new law. Thus v. 18 is a continuation of vv. 16-17 and still deals with semen. Further proof is supplied by the subscript, v. 32b, which summarizes vv. 16-18 as a single unit with semen as its subject [...].¹⁷

This uncleanness is not necessarily connected with the “lying with a woman” in a *sexual* sense. Even more, the Hebrew text does not read “if a man lies with a woman.” It just reads thus:

וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אִישׁ אִתָּהּ שִׁכְבַּת־זָרַע וְרָחַצוּ בַּמַּיִם וְטָמְאוּ עַד־הָעֶרֶב

“And a woman, which a man emitting semen lies with, they shall both wash themselves in water, and be unclean until the evening.”¹⁸

It does not necessarily or unambiguously speak about a man approaching a woman for sexual intercourse; it does not contain any of the clear expressions we would otherwise have to expect considering texts like Lev 18:19 or 20:17f. (“[...] approach a woman *to uncover her nakedness*” / “[...] *so that he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness*” / “[...] a man who lies with a [...] woman and *uncovers her nakedness*”), and others that are discussed in the next paragraph. Hence, the given verse could also be understood as describing a man near a woman who has an unintended (nocturnal) emission of semen, without any deliberate sexual intercourse. Before providing textual evidence in favor of this view, there are two linguistic challenges that need to be addressed.

Firstly, the use of the verb שָׁכַב in sexual contexts. This verb, followed by the direct object (אִשָּׁה + שָׁכַב), regularly refers to sexual intercourse rather than just physical proximity to another person. While this is mostly undisputed, there is broad textual evidence leading to the conclusion that it is, at least, no absolute rule. The instance in Lev 20:13, for example,

¹⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 930. This idea of a literal unit will soon be taken up again to be investigated more closely.

¹⁸ Compare the most exact German translations (Elberfelder and Luther) which thus translate this verse and seemingly connect it with the emission of semen referred to within the previous verses. The Targumim and the LXX provide no further insights.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

demonstrates that this construction is not sufficient to imply sexuality in every case; there it is still necessary to supplement a clarification that “if a man lies with a male” (וַאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אֶת-זָכָר) is actually to be understood “as with a woman” (בַּמִּשְׁכָּבִי אִשָּׁה), that means: in a sexual sense. Similarly, Lev 20:18: “[...] and he *uncovers* her *nakedness*,” וּגְלָה אֶת-עֶרְוַתָּהּ. Lev 20:20 also adds a remark to make sure the reader understands that indeed sexuality is meant (“[...] he has *uncovered* his uncle’s *nakedness*,” דָּדוֹ גְּלָה (עֶרְוַת)). In Lev 19:20, as well as in Lev 20:11f. it is again the context resp. a clarifying note, that determines the actual incident in view: “there shall be *punishment*” (Lev 19:20); “he has *uncovered* his father’s *nakedness*” (Lev 20:11); or “they have committed *incest*, their *bloodguiltiness* is upon them” (Lev 20:12).¹⁹ As these verses demonstrate, אָחַת + שָׁכַב for itself is apparently not sufficient to be immediately associated with sexuality in the reader’s mind, but has to be supplemented by unambiguous clarifications.

Further, there seems to be a distinction between אָחַת + שָׁכַב compared to a combination of שָׁכַב with the preposition “with” (אִתּוֹ + שָׁכַב) concerning the mutuality/consent of the sexual contact. The difference between אָחַת and עִם seems to be the force of the action. Mostly, in a situation of mutual consent the preposition עִם is used (to “lie with”); in situations of violence and force it rather is אָחַת (to “lie [someone]”). As the investigation of the different instances within the Hebrew Scriptures confirms, it appears uncontradicted that at least אָחַת + שָׁכַב, if used in a sexual context, dependably points at some violent force.²⁰ Now, it seems strange to assume a situation of violently

¹⁹ Even Lev 15:24, in close proximity of our verse Lev 15:18, does not necessarily imply sexual intercourse (although this is certainly included!), but would also be an adequate depiction of a man lying together with a woman when she suddenly starts to menstruate and thus “contaminates” him, rendering him ritually unclean (more on this verse below).

²⁰ While the story in Gen 19:32–34 with the daughters of Lot “lying (with)” their father demonstrates that both constructions can be used synonymously: וַיִּשְׁכַּבְהָ עִמּוֹ (v. 32); אָחַת וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּו (v. 33); אָחַת / שָׁכַב עִמּוֹ (both v. 34); וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמּוֹ (v. 35), other instances leave the impression that עִם indeed implies permission (mutual consent), while אָחַת rather denotes force. Cf. the following texts concerning אָחַת in a sexual context: Gen 34:2, 7 (please note the remark וַיִּעַנְהָ: “he humbled her”); 1 Sam 2:22; 2 Sam 13:14 (again: וַיִּעַנְהָ). See these verses with עִם concerning mutual consent: Gen 30:15f.; 39:7, 12, 14; Exod 22:16; 2 Sam 11:11; 12:24; 13:11. However, there are strong exceptions to this tendency, at least concerning שָׁכַב + עִם: Deut 22:25, 28f.; 2. Sam. 11:4. אָחַת + שָׁכַב, on the other hand, seems to permanently convey (at least subliminally, if not openly) a violent force, if used in context of sexuality.

forced sexuality in Lev 15:18—or any verse of Lev 15 at all, since it does not deal with morals, with sin, or punishments, but just with matters of ritual purity. This may lead the reader to the conclusion that this verse actually does not deal with sexuality (or, alternatively, that only forced sex renders the persons involved unclean!); otherwise the construction שָׁכַב + אִשָּׁה would evoke (probably unanswerable) questions about the origin and context of this force—and why it appears so suddenly in this verse without any connection to its context.

The different instances using שָׁכַב confirm the conclusion that, in general, the context determines the meaning (frequently *sexuality*, but also often simple, usual *sleeping*: Gen 19:4; 28:11.13; Exod 22:26; 2 Sam 4:5/7:12 (both שָׁכַב + אִשָּׁה!), and very often the *sleep of the dead*: Gen 47:30; Deut 31:16; 2 Sam 7:12; Ezek 31:18; 32:19.27-30; frequently in 1-2 Kgs and 1-2 Chr), and שָׁכַב, if used in a sexual context, speaks generally about illicit sexual contacts—שָׁכַב + אִשָּׁה even about forced illicit sex.²¹ Regarding these observations about שָׁכַב, the following points are significant for a better understanding of Lev 15:18:

(1) The entire chapter of Lev 15 does not at all deal with sins (illicit sexuality, etc.) and punishments, but just with purity and (ritual) defilement. Therefore, שָׁכַב would be out of place in this context, if meant to denote (illicit) sexual intercourse. “Going in to” or “knowing” one’s wife would be the adequate terms to be employed. Hence, the verb שָׁכַב in vv. 18 and 24 (cf. v. 33) seems to present its other meaning: simple sleeping (instead of sex), as the other instances in chapter 15 may confirm (vv. 4.20.26; “lying/sleeping [on something]”).

(2) The verb שָׁכַב is used in v. 18 as well as its parallel verse 24 (on this structure see below) with the direct object marker אִשָּׁה, which in general denotes a contact without mutual consent, but rather with force (rape).

Cf. on this also Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh. Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 513f.; this grammatical feature is particularly stressed by Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 446.

²¹Cf. also TWOT s.v. שָׁכַב; William C. Williams, “שָׁכַב,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 4:102; Davidson, *Flame*, 513/fn.35; see also the verse list of the previous footnote.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

Nothing at all in the context of these verses would support an understanding of violent sex. It rather implies that here is no mutuality given—simply because there is no sexuality! The incident dealt with emerges from only one person (v. 18: the man; v. 24: the woman) and “forces” the other one (his/her spouse) into the same ritual defilement—of course without mutual consent, just inadvertently. Thus $\text{בָּשָׁב} + \text{תָּא}$ is adequately applied in these verses, but, as it seems, even necessarily without any connection to sexuality (otherwise we would have to expect a strong punishment due to this violent sin, particularly concerning having sex during menstruation (v. 24): Lev 20:18; Ezek 18:6)!

(3) On the other hand, as several instances prove, $\text{בָּשָׁב} + \text{תָּא}$, if not appearing in a sexual context, describes simple lying (mostly sleeping), without any implications regarding mutuality or force, and (taken for itself) completely without any hints at sexuality.²²

(4) While Lev 15:18 and v. 24 use $\text{בָּשָׁב} + \text{תָּא}$, the summary in v. 33 employs $\text{בָּשָׁב} + \text{עַם}$ as its synonym. That makes clear that the direct object marker תָּא in vv. 18, 24 is not to be overemphasized. It seems there is no deeper sense to be discovered by this particular construction—at least not as a hint concerning (forced) sexuality.²³

(5) If Lev 15:18 really intends to say something about sexuality, one would have to expect a clarifying statement, as in the texts presented above (Lev 18:19; 20:11-13.17f.20), to make that point clear. It would be unreasonable to leave this ambiguous instance, so completely devoid of any contextual hints at sexuality, without any clarification, while entire chapters dealing with sexual transgressions (like Lev 18 and 20) are so explicit in their descriptions even though their context is so unambiguously clear.

There is a second issue that seems, for linguistic reasons, to weaken the position that will be presented on the following pages: Num 5:13. There it reads in context of punishment for an unfaithful wife: “If any man’s wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, *and a man has intercourse with her* [...]” (vv. 12b-13a.) It is evident from the context that “and a man has

²² See 2 Sam 4:5; 8:2; and some texts depicting the state of the dead as “lying/sleeping:” 2 Sam 7:12; Ezek 31:18; 32:19.27-30.

²³ This is again to be witnessed concerning Lev 20:11 ($\text{בָּשָׁב} + \text{תָּא}$) and its parallel in Deut 27:20 ($\text{בָּשָׁב} + \text{עַם}$).

intercourse with her” refers to sexual intercourse. The Hebrew phrase behind the translation is *וְשָׁכַב אִישׁ אִתָּהּ שִׁכְבַּת־זָרַע*, exactly the same appearing in Lev 15:18: *וְשָׁכַב אִישׁ אִתָּהּ שִׁכְבַּת־זָרַע* [...] (“a man lying with her with emission of semen”).²⁴ The literal meaning of the phrase for itself, however, is ambiguous as to the concrete act—whether unintended nocturnal emission or deliberate sexual intercourse. While the context of Num 5:13 clearly points to an intended transgression of the wedlock, the context of Lev 15:18, to the contrary, rather seems to allude to a man’s unintended (nocturnal) emission of semen, which renders him (ritually) unclean, and therefore the woman who lies with him in one bed becomes unclean as well. Just as with the first linguistic investigation on *שָׁכַב* above, the context (including its further linguistic features) must determine the particular meaning—as will now be further explicated.

To begin with, we have to take a closer look at the structure of the entire chapter 15. Milgrom recognizes two possible structures underlying this chapter, both emphasizing the passage about male and female discharges (vv. 16-24), respectively sexual intercourse (v. 18); his “more meaningful division of this chapter” looks as follows:²⁵

- A. Introduction (vv. 1-2a)
- B. Abnormal male discharges (vv. 2b-15)
- C. Normal male discharges (vv. 16f.)
- X. Marital intercourse (v. 18)
- C’. Normal female discharges (vv. 19-24)
- B’. Abnormal female discharges (vv. 25-30)
- [motive v. 31]
- A’. Summary (vv. 32f.)

Milgrom’s artificial break within the unit of vv. 16-18 for the purpose of declaring v. 18 and the supposed sexual intercourse to be the center of

²⁴ The only other verse with a very similar wording is Lev 19:20, again dealing with sexuality: “If a man lies with a woman having an emission of semen . . .” (*וְאִישׁ כִּי־יִשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ אִתָּהּ שִׁכְבַּת־זָרַע . . .*). As explained regarding Num 5:13 above, the exact meaning of the ambiguous expression must be determined by the context and is not clear enough by itself.

²⁵ Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 904f.; similarly John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*. Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 206; Davidson, *Flame*, 328.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

the chiasmic structure can hardly be supported by the linguistic features that apparently make vv. 16-18 a complete unit. As Whitekettle pointed out (and even Milgrom admitted earlier; see above),²⁶ the structure of the whole chapter is determined by the following Hebrew terms:²⁷

A	אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי	(v. 2b)	
B	וְאִישׁ כִּי	(v. 16)	
	C	וְאִשָּׁה כִּי	(v. 19)
	C	וְאִשָּׁה כִּי	(v. 25)

This structure portrays vv. 16-18 and vv. 19-24 as single, complete units. Nevertheless, Whitekettle tries to define an extra unit of v. 18. He assumes that the אִשָּׁר of v. 18 should be seen as marker of a particular unit, since it could be understood as a conditional particle. But the fairly rare use of אִשָּׁר as conditional particle in contrast to its frequent use as relative pronoun can hardly serve as satisfying explanation of a special unit, which appears so suddenly and so unconnected to its context, thus interrupting the underlying order of the entire chapter. There is no need to declare this instruction of v. 18 as a conditional sentence, especially since אִשָּׁר is used so frequently in the surrounding verses in its usual function as relative pronoun (see vv. 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 20, 22, 24, 26, 31, 33). There are different allusions pointing to the coherent structure especially of vv. 16-18 and 19-24, which should not so easily be broken up in favor of a rather unlikely semantic possibility.

In particular, considering the verses 19-24 one finds some kind of repetition, a parallel unit to the passage of vv. 16-18, now concerning (normal) female discharges. Especially the command in the last verse (v. 24), thus corresponding to the last verse of the passage concerning male discharges (vv. 16-18), is very similar to the one investigated: “And if a man actually lies with her, so that her menstrual impurity is on him, he shall be unclean seven days, and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean.” It is important to recognize that v. 18 and v. 24 are very closely connected

²⁶ Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 930; quoted above in the introduction to this section.

²⁷ Richard Whitekettle, “Leviticus 15:18 Reconsidered: Chiasm, Spatial Structure, and the Body,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 49 (1991): 35.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

with each other; they reflect the underlying principle in using the same structure, but referring to different (male/female) discharges.

The argument of Whitekettle that v. 18 employs the plural (both man and woman are one day unclean) while v. 24 contains the singular (only the man is seven days unclean)²⁸ is depending on several matters: (1) The structure is internally somehow reversed (first the plural in v. 19, followed by singulars in the next verses); (2) The whole unit (vv. 19-24) deals with persons contaminated by touching some contaminated material or person and especially the man's possible contamination is constantly emphasized; (3) The impurity is of a different kind: contamination with impure person or material renders unclean for *one* day, contact with impure flow renders unclean for *seven* days; in the man's unit is no such difference given, for the level of impurity obviously is less defiling and not "strong" enough to render persons unclean who just touched thus contaminated materials. But the most important argument regarding the objection that in v. 24 there is only the man called "unclean seven days" and not also the woman he has been contaminated by, is the fact that—contrary to the incident in v. 18—the menstruation lasts longer than one night and the woman perhaps has been unclean already for some days.²⁹ So she must not be unclean for seven more days, possibly over and over again! She is not rendered unclean anew; only the man becomes (newly) defiled at the time he is "contaminated" by her blood! The following structure regarding the type of contamination, the duration of impurity and the starting point thereof may be helpful to understand the point:

²⁸ Whitekettle, "Leviticus 15:18 Reconsidered," 35f. His further argumentation (p.36) that we would have to expect some different kind of wording if just contamination would be meant in v. 18 is the same argument that is applied in this proposal in the opposite direction: If sexuality would have been meant, why is there no clear wording given, such as Lev 18:19 or 20:18? Hence, it seems that only the overall context can be really helpful.

²⁹ It is important to notice that, contrary to some Bible translations, the Hebrew text of v. 24 does not exclusively speak about the sudden beginning of the menstruation (thus rendering both persons unclean for the same period, starting at the same day), but about the rather general case "that her menstrual impurity is on him" (וַיִּהְיֶה נִדְתָּהּ עָלָיו)—a case that might happen at any time of her menstruation, if she did not duly separate (for whatever the cause may be).

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

A (vv. 16f.) List of *contaminated material*; unclean until evening; no contamination from material to humans possible; contamination day: **X**.³⁰

B (v. 18) *Direct contamination* from impure man to woman, unclean until evening, both have *same duration* of uncleanness; contamination day: **X** (the uncleanness for both *begins always at the same time*, and *ceases always at the same time*).

A' (vv. 19-23) List of *contaminated material or persons*; unclean until evening; contamination from material to humans is possible; contamination day: **X or Y**.³¹

B' (v. 24) *Direct contamination* with the defiling flow; unclean for seven days; both have (generally) *same duration* of uncleanness; contamination day: **X or Y** (the uncleanness for both *may begin at different times*, and therefore *may cease at different times*).

The entire passage (vv. 16-24) is apparently structured according to the type, duration and level of impurity, culminating in the final verse of each unit as the climax with a direct contact to the defiling fluid.³² Besides the same structural pattern and the resulting similarity of both units (under consideration of different levels/durations of impurity), the given explanations also prove v. 24 as not alluding to sexuality, as is frequently argued! Since the only way for v. 24 to mean sexuality would be the sudden commencing of menstruation during intercourse (otherwise both participants would have to die; see Lev 18:19, 26-29), the different duration of the uncleanness points to a simple (possibly unintended) sleeping near each other, thus rendering the man unclean.³³ That would also fit v. 18 as

³⁰ X is the first day of the impurity, the starting day.

³¹ Y is the second to the seventh day of impurity; only possible and applicable in case of female (menstrual) impurity.

³² As we see, the fluid is the cause of uncleanness. However, it does not follow that normal sexual intercourse is defiling due to the fact that semen is involved. It is only the unintended (nocturnal) emission that is spoken of as rendering impure. A simple reason may be the ineffective shedding, the missing of its original aim and sense (this idea will be elaborated below).

³³ A menstruating woman had to separate—therefore it would not be easy to be contaminated, unless menstruation occurred suddenly, unexpectedly. However, there are quite a lot of further unusual circumstances in which it would be possible to be defiled, e.g. when it is impossible to separate in cases of illness, war, or just when separation has not been heeded strictly enough to prevent from any contact. But especially in cases of relations

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

climax of the paralleling unit, not dealing with sexual intercourse, but with simple sleeping near each other and thus being possibly contaminated.

There is another internal hint affirming this structure of connecting v. 18 and v. 24 and thus stressing their similarity or equality; again it is Milgrom, referring to v. 18, who honestly tells:

At the same time, the construction of this sentence has baffled the commentaries. Why is the woman subject if her case does not begin until the next verse? Would not this sentence flow more smoothly if it had read [...] “If a man has sexual relations with a woman”?³⁴

Reading this verse under consideration of the structure proposed below, thus recognizing the climax of possible defilement in the verses 18 and 24, there is no question to be answered.

Just like the verses before the high points in v. 18 and v. 24 contain a list of (lifeless) objects to be defiled by *simple contact*, so the respective climax speaks about the (living) object(s) to be defiled by *simple contact* from person to person (cf. v. 17/v. 20-23). This structure of both blocks is further supported by the unusual fact that, consequently, v. 18 begins with the woman (the word order in the Hebrew text is differing from the way e.g. the NASB reads it: (וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אִישׁ)—as living object liable to be defiled—and not with the man, then possibly reading: “If a man has sexual relations with a woman.” The woman in this case is to be interpreted as the object to be defiled, just as the man in v. 24 is the object to be defiled the other way round, by the woman. Both instances (vv. 15-18 and 19-24) speak about usual, defiling discharges and consequently list the objects to be defiled at the first position of each explanatory sentence.

Also, if interpreting v. 18 as exclusively referring to sexual intercourse, an important part in the list of possibly defiled “objects” due to nocturnal emissions would be missing: the wife. Obviously, the husband is an element of the women’s defilement-list (v. 24); but the wife would be missing in the men’s defilement list! Besides, that would not only

with non-Jewish women, etc. And we also see in the numerous laws of the Torah that Yahweh provided for those exceptional, unintended cases, possibly in times when some of the given instructions would not be heeded any more (cf. e.g. Deut 17:14-20; 24:1-4; 25:7-10).

³⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 930.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

inexplicably destroy the intention and completeness of the given laws; furthermore it destroys the structure presented by Milgrom and taken over by others, for C and C' would not be reflecting each other. They would not be dealing with the same elements regarding the normal (usual) male/female discharges, since the male does not (and consequently cannot?) defile the woman, as long as there is no sexual intercourse, but just a nocturnal emission; whereas women are always defiling men just by contact with their usual menses. Additionally, the kind (i.e. duration) of impurity is differing in both cases, thus indicating an affiliation to nocturnal emissions (v. 18) or menstruation (v. 24)–but not to an “inverted hinge,”³⁵ which would only feebly explain an unlikely insertion of an ordinance concerning sexual intercourse, while at the same time adhering to the same kind and lastingness of impurity given in the (completely different) context and demonstrated unity of vv. 16-18!³⁶ The following structure would fit the context, the textual syntax of vv. 18 and 24, and the overall subject much better:

A. Introduction (vv. 1-2a)

B. Abnormal male discharges (vv. 2b-15)

C. Normal male discharges defiling the concerned person himself (v. 16)

D. Defiling lifeless objects, which do not defile living objects (v. 17)

E. Internal, final Climax: defiling living objects: the wife (v. 18)

C'. Normal female discharges defiling the concerned person herself (v. 19)

³⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 930–31; Davidson and Gane follow that argumentation; cf. Davidson, *Flame*, 329; Roy Gane, *Leviticus / Numbers*. The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 263. This “inverted hinge” demands the change of $\text{וְ$ and $\text{וְ$, but does not regard that even v. 17 (also) contains the $\text{וְ$, thus binding together vv. 17 and 18 as a practical interpretation and further application of v. 16. There is no change or break between vv. 17 and 18, not even an inverted hinge. If so, we would also have to expect that inverted hinge in v. 24, thus shifting the sphere of defilement again up to conjugal intercourse. But this evidence is also missing.

³⁶ Cf. again Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 930; Whitekettle, “Leviticus 15:18 Reconsidered,” 35.

D'. Defiling **lifeless objects**, which do defile living objects (vv. 20-23)³⁷

E'. *Internal, final Climax*: defiling **living objects**: the **husband** (v. 24)

B'. **Abnormal** female discharges (vv. 25-30)

A'. **Summary** incl. rationale / motive (vv. 31-33)

The various considerations given above support this structure and interpretation. Then there is no need to explain the sudden, unexpected, and rather misplaced insertion of a precept about sexual intercourse, which is usually recognized only once in v. 18, overlooking its similarity to v. 24 and the fact that chapters 11-17 only deal with uncleanness and purification; sexual regulations are not dealt with until chapter 18, including commandments against sexual intercourse during menstruation (which thus would make Lev 15:24 redundant), using much more concrete terms:

You shall not approach a woman *to uncover her nakedness* during her menstrual impurity (Lev 18:19).

If there is a man who lies with a menstruous woman and *uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow, and she has exposed the flow of her blood* (Lev 20:18).

These instances leave not the smallest doubt that it now refers to sexual intercourse and not just to lying *near* an unclean person, as Lev 15:18.24 and the context indicate by pointing to defilements due to a simple *unintended contact*. That it could hardly be deliberate sexual intercourse these verses (i.e. Lev 15:18.24) are referring to, may be concluded from v. 24, since any deliberate sexual contact during menstruation would have to be punished by “cutting off from among their people” (cf. Lev 18:19.26-29). The only explanation for yet referring to sexuality would be

³⁷ Please note that the defilement from one unclean object to the other is of another degree (lasting only *one* day: vv. 19-23) than a contamination of the living object through the impure flow itself (lasting *seven* days: v. 24)!

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

the sudden beginning of the menstruation during sexual intercourse; but then, again, there would be no intention! Hence, when accepting v. 24 paralleling v. 18, one necessarily has to conclude that v. 18 is also dealing only with an unintended happening, since there is no reasonable way to see any deliberate act in being contaminated by the blood of v. 24. Furthermore, if v. 24 would actually be speaking about sexuality, we would have to expect the pronouncing of the impurity's duration for both participants in that verse, and not just for the man who apparently has newly been contaminated some day after the commencement of the woman's impurity. The entire chapter is seemingly dealing with unintended occurrences. To interpret v. 18 as the only exception, and that without any special introduction, a particular and unambiguous linguistic marker, or another obvious shifting of levels, is very unlikely.

As to the reason why it is only the nocturnal emission that has the potential to defile the woman, in contrast to usual sexual intercourse, this is easily explained by their different aims and results. While sexual intercourse is the instrument to follow the blessing of Gen 1:28, and to experience the mutual intimacy of Gen 2:24, nocturnal emission is completely devoid of such prospects and merely constitutes a rather senseless loss of "life liquids."³⁸ Furthermore, only thus there is another structural concordance between the male and female defilements in vv. 16-18 and vv. 19-24, since both passages contain such "life liquids" (semen and menstrual blood), both shed *in vain*, without reaching their original aims, namely: pregnancy/procreation. This is surely not applicable to sexual intercourse.³⁹ It seems evident that semen should not be shed except through conjugal intercourse.—Yet this must not result in reasoning that procreation is the only adequate aim of sex. Licit sexual intercourse involves much more; it constitutes the marital oneness, the deep intimacy hinted at in Gen 2:24 (the two become "one flesh"), it makes one deeply "know/experience" (יָדַע; Gen 4:1) one's spouse, and is described foremost with its lustful, pleasurable character in many instances, particularly in the

³⁸ Similarly, although erroneously applied to sexuality: Wenham, "Why does," 434; followed by other commentators who see the senseless loss of these life-giving liquids as rationale for the impurity mentioned in Lev 15:18.

³⁹ Albeit quite a lot of semen is lost anyway, sexual intercourse still moves toward the mentioned aims of intimacy (Gen 2:24) and procreation (Gen 1:28); nocturnal emission never does.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Song of Solomon—and even in context of the great longing for children as presented in Gen 18:12: “Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have become old, shall I have (sexual) pleasure (עֲדָנָה), my lord being old also?’” It is significant that, although both were waiting so long for descendants, Sarah nevertheless depicts the sexual act primarily as “having pleasure” and not as “procreating.”

Commentators mostly recognize an allusion to sexual intercourse and its (inherent) uncleanness only in v. 18, usually overlooking the similarity (and even actual equality) of v. 24.⁴⁰ But if both verses generally belong to the same realm, one has to inquire why the (quality/duration of the) uncleanness of v. 18 is not the same as in v. 24 while both instances are obviously referring to the same cause (act) of impurity.⁴¹ The duration is evidently depending on the kind of discharge, not the kind of act (i.e. sexual intercourse vs. “normal sleeping” beside each other including the resulting contamination). Consequently, the uncleanness itself must depend on the kind of discharge, and not the way one comes into contact with it. The most natural explanation for the similarity of vv. 18 and 24, and yet their different (quality/duration of) uncleanness, is to assume a communication

⁴⁰ An exception would be Milgrom and Hartley who also consider v. 24 as referring to sexual intercourse (cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 904; Hartley, *Leviticus*, 212). Others like Wenham, Whitekettle, and Davidson do not take this paralleling verse into consideration.

⁴¹ That it is not the same “level” of impurity and therefore not the same act as reason for the uncleanness, is to be seen from the fact that the uncleanness in the first instance (seminal emission) continues until evening, while the second (menstrual contamination) lasts seven days. Furthermore, we have to consider Deut 23:10f. which again speaks about a man’s unintended (nocturnal) emission, thus excluding him from the Israelite camp until bathing in the evening. Consequently, in connection with Lev 15:16f. it points to the fact that the uncleanness is not a result of sexual intercourse. Otherwise we would have to expect further instructions regarding sexual contacts with women in the camp (since even during military campaigns there might have been such intercourse; against Wenham, “Why does,” 432), or at least some special type of impurity with a peculiar time of uncleanness due to sexual relations in Lev 15:18 and/or v. 24. (Also, it might be interesting to notice that at least the ancient rabbis understood the “camp” of Deut 23:10 not as referring to a military campaign (v. 9 referring to Israel’s enemies for them was a complete ordinance in itself), but to the camp of the Levites and the Temple (cf. Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 62f.). Thus there would not be any connection at all between supposed impurity from sexuality and some military campaign, but it simply shows the necessity of separating (cf. 1 Sam 20:26). However, the context (vv. 9-14) suggests that the text indeed deals with a military campaign against Israel’s enemies.)

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

from one spouse to the other through lying in the same bed with each other at the time of nocturnal emission or menstruation—there is absolutely no need to put any *sexual* contact into these verses, particularly when considering the aforementioned very difficult problems that arise when we do this.⁴²

The summary of vv. 32f. is also of considerable importance, because there we find no reference to sexual intercourse, but just an abstract of the other, unambiguous topics:

This is the law for the one with a discharge, and for the man who has a seminal emission so that he is unclean by it, and for the woman who is ill because of menstrual impurity, and for the one who has a discharge, whether a male or a female, or a man who lies with an unclean woman.

It clearly alludes to the actual content, namely (as aforementioned in the structural outline above):

- A. Unusual (morbid) male discharges (vv. 2b-15)
- B. Usual (non-morbid) male discharge: (Nocturnal) emission of semen (vv. 16-18)
- B'. Usual (non-morbid) female discharge: menstruation (vv. 19-24)
- A'. Unusual (morbid) female discharges (vv. 25-30)

Even the order of the chapter's content is echoed in vv. 32f., thus presenting a precise summary of the given subjects, thereby excluding a sudden insertion of other topics like common sexuality. It really seems that there is no place and no reason to find a short statement about usual, licit sexual intercourse in v. 18. Judging from the given text, its structure, context, and wording in Lev 15, there is generally no ritual uncleanness at all attached to legal sexual intercourse, because it generally does not deal with this kind of incident. What makes sexuality “unclean” is finally stated in chapter 18 of the book of Leviticus, dealing with deliberate actions that violate holy law. Hence, “pure” and “impure” regarding sexuality have to

⁴² We again have to notice that the previous verses 16f. and 19-23 are only dealing with defiling different objects *by contact*. Consequently, the respective climax found at the end of each passage by referring to humans is also indicating that even humans will be defiled *by contact*—simple contact, without the necessity of sexual intercourse.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

be reasoned by those ordinances;⁴³ licit sexuality goes out free of any impurity.

Furthermore, considering the consequences, God would evidently disapprove of his own Edenic institution (marriage) with all the negative consequences involved in that perception.⁴⁴ It is hardly possible to interpret the ritual uncleanness reasonably, while simultaneously keeping exalted the Edenic ideal of oneness (Gen 2:24: “one flesh”) as the great “holistic” feature⁴⁵ and the perfect unity approved by God and even used as significant symbolism of his relationship with Israel (resp. Christ and the church: Eph 5:30-32). Transferring these consequences to the spiritual sphere God is using to describe his relationship with Israel, it would mean that the deepest intimacy (“one spirit“ with God in 1 Cor 6:16f.) would be defiling the intimate (spiritual) relationship he wants to share with Christians.

In fact, particularly the rationale for rendering participants of conjugal intercourse ritually unclean is the crux of this case for those understanding that Lev 15:18 indeed deals with sexual intercourse.⁴⁶ It is mostly explained by the strict separation of Yahweh from anything related to the “cycle of

⁴³ As we have seen above, Philo works in just that way declaring only that kind of sexuality unclean which is against the divine order given in Lev 18 and similar chapters evidently dealing with sexuality and not with uncontrollable discharges.

⁴⁴ So e.g. Wenham states: “In my commentary on Leviticus (1979) I realised this problem and was therefore unable to see symbolic significance in the uncleanness of sexual intercourse.” (Wenham, “Why does,” 433.) Although he tries to give an explanation on pp.433f., it is not really satisfying, as Whitekettle demonstrated (see Whitekettle, “Leviticus 15:18 Reconsidered,” 32-34).

⁴⁵ Cf. e.g. Davidson, *Flame, passim*; Hartley, *Leviticus*, 211.

⁴⁶ Cf. e.g. Hartley, *Leviticus*, 210f.: “Since sexual intercourse, above all in the context of marriage, is essential to carry out God’s command given to humans at creation, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ (Gen 1:28), and his great promise of numerous descendants to Abraham (Gen 15:5), it is baffling that legitimate sexual intercourse renders the participants unclean.” Wenham honestly admits: “[...] the law in Lev 15:18 [...] is one of the most puzzling in the OT. It seems to run counter to the whole tenor of biblical morality. [...] as Dillmann forcibly pointed out, there is no suggestion that marital intercourse or childbirth (cf. Lev 12) were ever considered sinful in Israel. Indeed it is hard to see how this could be so against the background of Gen 1:28; 9:7.” (Wenham, “Why does,” 432.) Cf. also Davidson, *Flame*, 329-332; for a survey of (rather unsatisfying) explanations see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 766.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

life and death.”⁴⁷ Therefore, anything like male semen, female blood flow, and, finally, even sexual intercourse itself would be defiling, for it belongs to the realm of procreation. The ineffective shedding of life fluids⁴⁸ is, at least, a good explanation for the separation demanded by Yahweh regarding the general morbid as well as non-morbid discharges, but concerning the Edenic command to multiply (and that requires sexual intercourse) it only serves as a poor and unsatisfactory explanation, as is candidly admitted by

⁴⁷ Cf. on these opinions e.g. Davidson, *Flame*, 328-331; Whitekettle, “Leviticus 15:18 Reconsidered,” 31-41; Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 60.207; Gane, *Leviticus/Numbers*, 261f.; R. Laird Harris, “Leviticus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1990), 586; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 904f.930f.; Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus. The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 427; John I. Durham, *Exodus. Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 265; Hartley, *Leviticus*, 210f. Rooker reasons from 15:31 that vv. 16-18 are just a precaution against any pagan fertility cult within the tabernacle precinct; and that “this demythologizing of sex thus has a polemical role; the legislation does not indicate that sex was sinful and without value.” (Cf. Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus. The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 203f.) But he does not directly discuss the aspect of ritual uncleanness perhaps due to sexual intercourse.

⁴⁸ Wenham, “Why does,” 433f.; Hartley, *Leviticus*, 211; Davidson, *Flame*, 331. Another explanation is given by Whitekettle, “Leviticus 15:18 Reconsidered,” 39-44, who convincingly criticizes Wenham’s argumentation and proves it to be wrong in case of Lev 15:18, since it is too far from the actual setting and biological circumstances of sexual intercourse (cf. Hartley, *Leviticus*, 211). Furthermore, Whitekettle explains the crossing of “functional boundaries” (urination and seminal emission) to be the defiling cause (Whitekettle, “Leviticus 15:18 Reconsidered,” 43f.) But, consequently, every act of urination would again render the man unclean, for the “functional boundaries” are crossed again the other way round! Also, if only the crossing of functional boundaries is to be regarded as reason, the woman would again only be defiled by contamination, not by active participation. And that is again contrary to the whole foundation of Whitekettle’s argumentation (cf. p. 36). Hartley simply understands the text as some prevention against the introduction of sexual acts in the sanctuary (Hartley, *Leviticus*, 211). This explanation is not really better, since there are other regulations against temple prostitution that are dealing much more clearly with this danger (cf. e.g. Deut 23:18). His second explanation (p. 214) of the law as to control sexual passion is also unsatisfying, for the common Israelite would not have to attend the sanctuary very often, while the priests, on the other hand, would excessively be kept from sexual “pleasure/delight” (תְּנוּגָה; Gen 18:12) and thus even from the chance to procreate—intemperance evidently would have to be dealt with in another, more obvious way.

some researchers.⁴⁹ It would be more precise to term it a “deviation from comprehensive life” (instead of “cycle of *life and death*”), since all those elements are defiling that are associated with a loss of life (and not those giving life!): Contact with (1) a loss of life-giving blood (menstruation, blood flow after childbirth, morbid discharges . . .); (2) a loss of life-giving semen (nocturnal emission, morbid discharges . . .); (3) disease and death (leprosy, carrion, dead humans. . .). Obviously, sex is not part of any of these categories and as such would be completely out of place in Lev 15—and, in fact, anywhere else. Having licit sex, to the contrary, belongs to the realm of pure life, will usually be life-increasing, in fact, life-giving—having nothing to do with a loss of life-giving fluids, with disease or death. Furthermore, God is never associated with the foregoing categories of deviating from life, he never commands anything that would necessarily result in ritual impurity. But sex is part of the divine plan for human happiness and wholeness—already in sinless paradise (Gen 1:28), where originally absolutely no “deviation from comprehensive life” existed, but where everything was approved of him as being “very good” (Gen 1:31).⁵⁰ The state of mortality as the basis of the intriguing theory of

⁴⁹ Maccoby, for instance, explains: “Some of the discharges that produce impurity are indeed life-diminishing (abnormal discharges of semen or menstrual blood), but they are not enough to substantiate a theory that requires that all life-diminishing discharges defile. Moreover, normal loss of semen hardly comes into the category of life-diminishing discharges. [...] Involuntary loss of semen might be regarded as life-diminishing, but a discharge that produces new life cannot be so regarded.” (Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 31; cf. Whitekettle, “Leviticus 15:18 Reconsidered,” 33.38; Davidson, *Flame*, 331/fn.102 also points to this fact.) Nonetheless Maccoby and Whitekettle share the common view that conjugal sexuality is always defiling (Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 30-32.58f.; Whitekettle, “Leviticus 15:18 Reconsidered,” 42-44). Gane, *Leviticus/Numbers*, 261 clearly explicates that “human sexuality and reproduction are not intrinsically impure. The Lord created this facet of life for perfect human beings in a perfect world (Gen 1:27f.; 2:23-25). Made in the image of the holy God (1:26f.), they were designed to continue and participate in, the divine process of creation, thereby emulating their Creator. So God intended sexuality to be a vital component of holy living (cf. the Song of Songs).” And he finally states: “Marriage is still honorable and the marriage bed remains morally pure (Heb 13:4).” (Gane, *Leviticus/Numbers*, 262.) His interpretation of Lev 15:18, however, still follows the common opinion of ritually impure sexuality, although it would be only life-giving, and so weakens the previous statements about the positive aspects of sexuality, which are generally right.

⁵⁰ Attentive readers might respond that having sex, becoming pregnant, and finally giving birth, indeed results in a ritual defilement, namely: blood flow after childbirth (Lev 12). That’s right and might be the only exception. Considering Gen 3:16, however, it seems

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

the “cycle of life and death” did not yet exist in paradise—but sex did. After the Fall there emerged different “deviations from comprehensive life,” as those mentioned above. Sexuality, however, does not belong to this post-Fall state of mortality and disease, but to the Edenic ideal of everlasting life, health, and comprehensive well-being.

Further Evidence?

Exod 19:14f. In scholarly literature the interpretation of Lev 15:18 is at times linked with the command given at Mount Sinai before Yahweh’s glory came down to the mountain top:

The Lord also said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; and let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. [...]”

So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman,” (Exod 19:10f.14f.)

The expression “do not go near a woman” (אל-תִּגַּשׁ אִשָּׁה) is often interpreted as a euphemism meaning “to have sexual relations with a woman.”⁵¹ Taking into consideration that the Mosaic legislation is

likely that this circumstance could be linked to the changes appearing after the Fall. As this verse instills, birth in paradise would have been without pain— incredible for women nowadays. So why could it not, consequently, also have been without defilement due to some way of avoiding blood flow (e.g. a much better and incredibly fast “healing” process)—similarly incredible for us today? However, it still remains true that sex *per se*, in the first place, has nothing to do with a senseless loss of semen or blood (although possibly resulting circumstances may have).

⁵¹ See e.g. Wenham, “Why does,” 432; Davidson, *Flame*, 329f.; Gane, *Leviticus/Numbers*, 581 and many others; cf. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “Sexuality and Holiness: Semitic Christian and Jewish Conceptualizations of Sexual Behavior,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 54 (2000): 388-394 about the ancient rabbinic interpretation (also referring to sexual abstinence concerning Exod 19:15) as given in *Abot R. Nat.* 2:3; *Exod. Rab.* 19:3/47:3; *b. Šabb.* 87a/ *Yeb.* 62a. (Similarly Philo in *Mos.* 2:68f., focusing on Moses’ continence.) Josephus renders the phrase in Exod 19:15 as possibly referring to sexuality (cf. *A.J.* 3:78). He is deviating from the LXX which is, like the Hebrew text, only speaking about “approaching/coming near” (μη προσέλθητε γυναικ; cf. LSJ/BDAG and Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint (=LEH)*. 1st ed., Stuttgart: Deutsche

generally unambiguous when speaking about sexuality, we have to assert that this text is conspicuously ambiguous and unclear. It actually is very strange and significant that it does not read, “Do not *lie* with a [better: your] woman,” as is formulated frequently in other instances—even within the same book (Exodus), only three chapters away (cf. Exod 22:15.19)! At least, there are no general euphemistic tendencies detectable in this book that might support the euphemism theory. In fact, the Hebrew שכב (“lie”), functioning as an indicator of sexual relations in many instance it is used—except another meaning (i.e., simple sleep or the sleep of the dead) is clearly supported by the given context—⁵² is completely absent in the entire passage. Similarly any hint at a man “knowing” (יָדַע; e.g. in Gen 4:1) or “going in to” (בָּאָה + אֵל; usually אָלַיָּהּ אָלַיָּהּ, e.g. in Gen 29:23; 30:4; 38:2.18; Ruth 4:13) his wife is missing. The text only speaks about “approaching/drawing near” (שָׁנָה). Thus the mere contact is emphasized, not just intimate (sexual) intercourse. It rather speaks about contamination which occurred even by simple contact when coming (too) close to any menstruating woman, because that would make them unable /ineligible to draw near to Yahweh.⁵³ The Hebrew שָׁנָה (“draw near”), in fact, nowhere else (of 125 instances in the OT!) connotes sexuality and appears in only two instances in context of touching, embracing, or kissing someone (cf.

Bibelgesellschaft, 2003 s.v. προσέρχομαι). Josephus writes ἀπὸ συνουσίας τῆς γυναικῶν, while this συνουσία literally means just “a being with/social intercourse/society/conversation/communion/intercourse with a teacher/cohabitation” (LSJ s.v. συνουσία), but he uses it also as euphemism for sexual intercourse (cf. e.g. *A.J.* 3:275; 6:235; 19:239; *C.Ap.* 2:203.234). However, he also knows the more decent and discreet meaning of a social gathering and friendly conversation (cf. *A.J.* 1:167; 5:307; 12:118.197; 14:454; 15:241; 18:150; *B.J.* 1:489.570).

⁵² Cf. on concretely implying sexuality: Gen 19:32-35 (7x); 26:10; 30:15f.; 34:2.7; 35:22; 39:7.10.12.14; Exod 22:15.18; Lev 18:22; 19:20; 20:11.12.13.18.20; Num 5:13.19; Deut 22:22-29 (5x); 27:20-23 (4x); 28:30. Sleeping with different genital discharges: Lev 15:4.18.20.24.26.33. Simple sleep: Gen 19:4; 28:11.13; 47:30; Exod 22:26; Lev 14:47; 26:6; Num 23:24; 24:9; Deut 6:7; 11:19; 24:12f.; 31:16.

⁵³ Cf. William H. Propp, *Exodus 19-40. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 162f.; he also asserts that the verb used in this instance for “approaching/go near [a woman]” (שָׁנָה) “may originally have connoted touching.” Hence, “this command addressed to the men, might be meant either euphemistically—do not heterosexual intercourse—or literally—to avoid women, lest they spread menstrual impurity,” (Ibid, 163).

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

Gen 27:21-27; 48:10)!⁵⁴ To suppose a sexual meaning just once in the given passage seems too far-fetched for a verb occurring so frequently with another (less intense/intimate) meaning. It is more naturally explained by considering a ritual defilement through simple contamination, possibly by touching, embracing, or kissing a woman. This contamination happens, of course, likewise through sexual contact with a (suddenly) menstruating woman. The intention of Exod 19:15, however, is not only this possible incident, but any way the consecrated men might run the risk of becoming unclean immediately before approaching their holy God. The text is not declaring mere sexual intercourse to be defiling. Hence, it speaks rather generally about “a [namely: any] woman” instead of “your woman/wife.”

Of course it is possible that some other uncleanness occurs even without touching women (Lev 12-15), and in order to avoid any impurity due to these other possible defilements, all men were consecrated “for the third day” by washing themselves on the first and second days (and perhaps even immediately) before the Lord’s approach. So there would finally just the women be left as the only possibility to be accidentally defiled immediately before meeting Yahweh if a woman suddenly began to menstruate and then touched one of the consecrated men. Consequently there are precautions to be taken by generally separating from women, not just by abstaining from sexual intercourse.

If the time of consecration is to be understood as lasting for three days—from the day when Moses went down from the mountain (v. 14) until the third day of the Lord’s appearance (v. 15)—we have to recognize that this time span is not in accordance with the ordinances given in Lev 15:16-24! In fact, the time for consecration would have to last for at least one day (due to the possible uncleanness of seminal emission or contact with something that has been touched by a menstruating woman) or for

⁵⁴ Cf., for instance, this selection of the occurrences within the Pentateuch: Gen 18:23; 19:9; 29:10; 33:3.6-7; 43:19; 44:18; 45:4; 48:13; Exod 19:22; 20:21; 21:6; 24:2.14; 28:43; 30:20; 32:6; 34:30.32; Lev 2:8; 8:14; 21:21.23; Num 4:19; 8:19; 32:16; Deut 20:2; 21:5; 25:1.9. Please note further esp. 2 Sam 17:29 where שָׁׁ is used without any sexual connotation and then שָׁׁׁ is added to indicate the following sexual contact. As aforementioned within the word study on שָׁׁׁ (above), this word for itself is evidently not sufficient to imply sexuality.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

seven days (if directly contaminated by menstrual blood).⁵⁵ Besides the generally blurred wording, this exact period of three days seems to interrupt any linkage to Lev 15:18 or 24. It could as well be the case that it does not deal with any of the impurities spoken about in Lev 15! It could simply be a time of special consecration for the most holy Lord's approaching, without any particular reference to common ritual impurity—which, of course, would have to be avoided anyway. Even to abstain from legal, conjugal sexuality would be adequate in this context, for the waiting men should be completely consecrated, focusing solely on the Lord's soon arrival.⁵⁶

Another idea would be possible, albeit not that likely: Considering the given ANE cultural setting with its frequent sacralization of sex and (some) women's part therein by serving the deity through prostituting themselves,⁵⁷ the precept in Exod 19:15 could also be understood as a precaution for Israel (and their heathen observers) to be sure that no mixing of sexuality and cult would occur—not even as a misunderstanding of the holy things to be witnessed.

⁵⁵ Cf. Lev 15:16-24. Kaiser reads Exod 19:15 as a command to abstain from sexual intercourse. Yet he does not link it with ritual impurity. For him it is just a sign for the inner purification and preparation (cf. Walter C. Kaiser, "Exodus," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1990), 418; cf. also Francis D. Nichol and M. L. Andreasen, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary. The Holy Bible with Exegetical and Expository Comment (=ABC)*, Rev ed., 7 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), Exod 19:10, 596), thus, for Buttrick, marking the beginning of "Sunday clothes" (cf. J. Coert Rylaarsdam, "The Book of Exodus: Exegesis," in *The Interpreter's Bible. The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for each Book of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), 974). Propp clearly points out that "a male seminal emission elicited by proximity to a woman would also be ritually defiling." (Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 163.) Thus, he rather supports the view that it is the seminal emission while lying near a woman which is defiling, not sexual intercourse *per se*. Nonetheless, he contemplates about other possible reasons for the required separation in Exod 19:15. Stuart holds the (possible) opinion, that men and women were addressed and should have met Yahweh. (Stuart, *Exodus*, 427; cf. also Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 163.) So the command would be pertaining to women as well, guarding themselves not to be defiled by some possible male impurity.

⁵⁶ More on this see below, the passage: "Humble Your Souls" or a Missing Precept?

⁵⁷ See for a good overview of the ANE cultural setting concerning sex and cult: Davidson, *Flame*, 85-97; about its impact on Israel see further pp. 97-113.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

It seems that all three possible cases (of understanding the text) do not provide a hint at any impurity attached to licit sexuality, but point to widely differing motivations of keeping a distance to (all) women (not only wives).

1 Sam 21:4f. Beside this text in Exodus, a similar occurrence in 1 Sam 21:4f. is used as rationale for interpreting sexual intercourse in itself as being unclean.⁵⁸ There it reads:

And the priest answered David and said, “There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women.” And David answered the priest and said to him, “Surely women have been kept from us as previously when I set out and the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was an ordinary journey; how much more then today will their vessels be holy?”

The expression “if only the young men have kept themselves from women” (אם־נִשְׁמְרוּ הַנְּעָרִים אֶךְ מֵאִשָּׁה) again does not necessarily indicate sexual intercourse. It just speaks about “protecting/being careful” (שָׁמַר).⁵⁹ Again it may refer to ritual impurity due to female discharges, just like the previous instance (Exod 19:15) probably indicates. But also any avoidance of sexuality might be possible—evidently without declaring conjugal intercourse to be impure, but simply defining a time of special consecration

⁵⁸ Cf. e.g. P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel. A New Translation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 349; Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel. Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 213; Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel. The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 222; Wenham, “Why does,” 432; Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 61f.; Davidson, *Flame*, 334. The text in 2 Sam 11:11, frequently referred to by commentators when interpreting 1 Sam 21:4f., is again not (primarily) speaking about the issue of sexuality that Uriah is refraining from! He just demonstrates his moral sensibility by not indulging in a comfortable, easy living while “the ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field.” The kind of (comfortable) living obviously is the center of Uriah’s exclamation, not his possible sexual intercourse with his wife that might occur when sleeping in one bed with her! And even if that would have been Uriah’s message (what it surely was not!), he might also have been thinking of possible impurities he might be contaminated with, thus being excluded for at least one day (but possibly even up to seven days!) from his campaign (cf. Deut 23:10f.)!

⁵⁹ Cf. Ludwig Köhler and others, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (=HALOT)*. 1994-2000 Koninklijke Brill ed., Leiden/ New York: E.J. Brill, 1994 s.v. שָׁמַר; and BDB שָׁמַר; (similarly the LXX: “guarding/defending/preventing;” cf. BDAG/LSJ s.v. φυλάσσω).

adequate for the approaching of the Lord, just like the instance in Exod 19:15 might demonstrate.

Furthermore, David refers to what is at times translated as “bodies” of his soldiers, by calling it “vessels” (כֵּלִי). If כֵּלִי has to be translated as his soldier’s “equipment/weapons,” which is most likely,⁶⁰ it would just point to a ritual defilement of the armors, which had to be purified. But the only defilement imaginable in this case would be a contamination by blood—just like it could have happened in case of having any unintentional contact with (menstruating) women. And even if it is to be understood as the “bodies” of his soldiers, it would again be dealing with ritual impurity by *simple contact*, especially emphasized by using “vessel”—the same term which is used oftentimes within Lev 11-15 when speaking about defilement by *contamination*.

At least, it is very unusual to employ these expressions if it is intended to (1) allude to sexual intercourse, and (2) impurity by sexual intercourse—and not just by contact with an impure (e.g. menstruating) woman. Furthermore, even if Lev 15:18 would refer to impurity due to sexual intercourse, there still is no Mosaic legislation to instruct the priest of requiring sexual abstinence from David’s soldiers for *three* days. *One* day would have been enough by contact with semen or anything that has been touched by a menstruating woman; *seven* days would be necessary by direct contamination with menstrual blood (Lev 15:16-24). But *three* days must have been some different time span, without any (concrete) connection to Lev 15:18 (or 24), but much more to Exod 19:15 and the encountering of Yahweh that required this special time of consecration and separation—without any connection to some impurity attached to possible sexual intercourse.⁶¹

“Humble Your Souls” or a Missing Precept? Another consideration should be mentioned. Some scholars hold that the command to “humble/afflict one’s soul” (piel of עָנָה + נָפַשׁ; Lev 16:29.31; 23:27.32) resp. to “be humbled/afflicted [before God]” (pual of עָנָה; Lev 23:29) on the Day of Atonement includes sexual abstinence in context of approaching God. This

⁶⁰ See *BDB/HALOT* s.v. כֵּלִי and all the other 275 (!) instances containing כֵּלִי within the OT.

⁶¹ Interestingly, even in Exod 19:15 it is Moses who adds the separation from women to the divine command of consecration that Yahweh had previously given.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

view is at times supplemented by a reference to the rabbinic opinion mentioned in *m. Yoma* 8:1 listing the following things to abstain from: “On the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat and to drink, to wash, to anoint, to lace on shoes, and to hold sexual intercourse.” While it is, of course, possible to have these things included within the rather vague expression “humble/afflict your souls; be humbled/afflicted,” they are at least nowhere commanded within the biblical evidence—neither in context of the Day of Atonement, nor in any other comparable instance. While abstinence from food (perhaps including potables) can be witnessed in texts like Ps 35:13 (“I *humbled* my soul *with fasting*”), Isa 58:3 (“Why have we *fasted* and You do not see? Why have we *humbled* ourselves and You do not notice?;” cf. further the parallelism of “hungry” and “humbled” in v. 10), and 2 Sam 12:16f., the description of what David did immediately after his fasting in 2 Sam 12:20 may further show a possible avoidance of washing, anointing, and (beautiful, comfortable) clothing (instead of simple sackcloth or another humble garment; cf. also Ps 35:13; Esther 4:1; 1 Chr 21:16): “So David arose from the ground, *washed, anointed* himself, and *changed his clothes*; and he came into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he came to his own house, and when he requested, they set *food* before him and *he ate*.” (Italics supplied.) Dan 10:3 further hints at the fact that abstinence from food could refer to (only) some special diet, such as avoiding wine, meat, and “tasty food.”⁶² It seems to be a personal, and therefore to some extent also individual, decision which elements are chosen within one’s humbling before God.

What we may generally say about the OT evidence is, at least, that abstinence from sexuality is nowhere commanded and nowhere (not even basically) witnessed by the biblical writers – although it nevertheless would be an adequate preparation to avoid the pleasures of sexuality when even “smaller” pleasures like “tasty food” (Dan 10:3) or comfortable clothing are shunned. It seems to be a fact that all the passages dealing with holy ministries and special events/festivals including the approaching of God at his sanctuary do not give any hints at requirements of sexual abstinence. One would have to expect these in clear terms, if really necessary and

⁶² Besides, Daniel also refrained from ointment: “I did not eat any *tasty food*, nor did *meat* or *wine* enter my mouth, nor did I use any *ointment* at all until the entire three weeks were completed.” (Dan 10:3; my italics.)

demanded. And even if these would exist, the argumentation (compared to Lev 15:18) would still be different: To avoid sexual pleasure in order to humble oneself is far from avoiding sexuality due to a ritual defilement that could be connected with it. To abstain from wine, meat, and “tasty food” as well as wearing sackcloth and shunning washing or ointment has nothing to do with a ritual necessity—it is a personal consecration in times of need, when a human realizes his own miserable, sinful, poor (and therefore: “humble/afflicted”) state before the almighty, holy God. One does not avoid these common elements of (a pleasurable) life because they would be impure; the same is true of (the pleasure of) sexuality.

A New Testament Hint? Just as an afterthought regarding this subject it might be interesting to take a New Testament statement into consideration. The author of the letter to the Hebrews in 13:4 quite clearly states that honoring the marriage relation and / by keeping the marriage bed undefiled from fornication and adultery obviously not only bears the approval of God, but expressly please(s) him. A more exact translation of this text reveals and emphasizes another meaning, contributing to the impetus of this article:

- (A) τίμιος
 - (B) ὁ γάμος
 - (C) ἐν πᾶσιν
 - (B') καὶ ἡ κοίτη
 - (A') ἀμίαντος
 - (D) πόρνους γὰρ καὶ μοιχοὺς κρινεῖ ὁ θεός
-
- (A) Precious/honorable [is]
 - (B) the marriage relation
 - (C) in all parts/completely,
 - (B') and the marriage-bed (i.e., sexuality⁶³)
 - (A') [is] undefiled/pure,
 - (D) but fornicators and adulterers will be judged by God.

⁶³ The Greek term κοίτη is a euphemism for “sexual intercourse/cohabitation/emission”; see BDAG/LSJ s.v. κοίτη.

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

This verse, especially considering the emphasis and focus on the importance of sexuality within marriage by the parallelism of B||B', stresses in A||A' the purity of sexuality within this divinely ordained (monogamous, lasting) relation, contrasted to illicit sexual relations of fornicators and adulterers (D).⁶⁴ It might be applicable as reference to the New Testament understanding of marital sexuality as something that is known to be entirely pure (morally and ritually); and that the author is speaking against those well-known notions of (Hellenistically influenced) first century Judaism that declared sexuality to be impure and not proper for men serving God—as Josephus and Philo might be understood. Corresponding to this perception of Heb 13:4, defilement is received by immorality (that means: illegal sex according to laws like those of Lev 18 and 20), not by licit sexuality (according to Gen 2:24).

Conclusions

While the investigation of Lev 15:18 among modern scholars mostly led to a discussion about the possible reasons for the impurity attached to legal, conjugal intercourse, this study aimed to inquire another point: whether it deals with sexuality at all. The baffling problems connected with current interpretations would thus be solved quite easily. Beginning with ancient Jewish evidence, one finds that the earliest Jewish “commentators” Philo and Josephus understood Lev 15:18 as a (*moral*) defilement of conjugal intercourse due to the seemingly unavoidable pleasures. A completely different kind of argumentation is witnessed in their works, not supporting recent scholarly research in its hypotheses. These ancient Jewish scholars were apparently molded by the strong Hellenistic influences of their time and they were aware of the inner Jewish diversity existing not only in Palestine, but also in the Diaspora where both authors were living in the time of their writing (Alexandria and Rome). It also has to be recognized that particularly the field of impurity and purifications has been expanded and intensified by the most influential Jewish groups (esp.

⁶⁴ Cf. also the KJV version which is similar: “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.” Here also the contrast between legal (= not defiling) and illegal (= defiling) sexuality becomes strikingly clear. Heb 13:4 apparently declares sexuality within the marriage bonds to be generally pure and undefiled, unlike illegal intimate relationships outside of it. Of course, the defilement of illegal sex is of a moral character and not ritual.

Pharisees and Essenes) which distinctively molded the Jewish practice of everyday life (*halakha*) and to a large extent even the spiritual perception of ancient Judaism. The New Testament frequently criticizes the halakhic “excesses” of that time. Hence, one must not have too much confidence in any interpretation of the Mosaic material so many hundreds of years after its emergence in the establishing process of early Israel. Although Philo, Josephus, and the rabbinic evidence may give us important hints to some common practice in ancient Judaism of the Greco-Roman period, this halakhic understanding and practice is not necessarily adequate to present original, authentic interpretation of Mosaic laws, as already the inner Jewish sectarian diversity of the second century BC up to at least 70 AD convincingly demonstrates. While the rabbinic tradition generally agrees with the perception of Philo and Josephus regarding the impurity of sexuality, it declares intercourse *per se* as being unclean, regardless of any seminal emission. The rabbis have no explanation for that law and thus neither support theses of current research, nor do they contradict them. The evidence they provide is altogether very unsatisfactory and not really helpful for a consistent interpretation of Lev 15:18.

Besides these ancient Jewish opinions and their apparent reference to at least some stream of Jewish halakhic tradition and (in Philo and Josephus) the application of a dualistic philosophy, the next step was to reappraise the Old Testament evidence. The center of any scholarly argumentation on sexual impurity of legal intercourse is found in Lev 15:18. The other texts are depending on the interpretation of that short ordinance. What we found is the following evidence that rather supports the perception that the text does not speak about sexuality at all, but just about an unintended, uncontrollable nocturnal emission of semen:

(1) There are two distinct, complete units (vv. 16-18 /19-24) speaking about usual (non-morbid) discharges of (1) males and (2) females.

(2) They are parallel to each other and contain a similar, final climax corresponding to the “highest level” of contamination from (1) man to woman and (2) woman to man.

(3) Both units have individual kinds of impurity, rendering both man and woman (the causing person and the contaminated) only in their climax similarly unclean (vv. 18: both *one* day, beginning at the *same* day; v. 24: man *seven* days, corresponding to the *seven* days of the woman, but of course possibly *deviating* in the *starting day!*).

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

(4) The paralleling equality of both units is not continually kept up by commentators. On the one hand they at times assert the equivalence of v. 18 and v. 24, on the other hand only v. 18 is understood as dealing with sexual impurity, for v. 24 obviously is not (at least not in the same way, i.e. *deliberately, uncontrollable*). The defiling “factor” evidently is the unintended contamination with blood. But that evidence is not consequently transferred to v. 18 (defiling factor would be *unintended, uncontrollable* (nocturnal) seminal emission).

(5) The structures of the chapter presented by commentators are mostly inconsistent. While v. 24 is sometimes interpreted as speaking about sexuality, the chiasmic structures are artificially modeled to meet the demands of a special position of v. 18 (excluding v. 24), since otherwise there is no reasonable rationale to suddenly change content, level of impurity, and level of intention (to a deliberate act).

(6) The respective climaxes (vv. 18.24) have different durations of uncleanness, what alludes to the fact that different kinds of impurities are given. The cause of impurity therefore is not intercourse, but contamination with differently defiling substances, thus exactly fitting the context.

(7) In both paralleling units we find (1) the cause of impurity as an introduction (v. 16: unintended, uncontrollable seminal emission; v. 19: unintended, uncontrollable menstruation); (2) lists with possible objects to be defiled by this given cause (v. 17: lifeless objects; vv. 20-23: lifeless objects and persons by contact to these objects); (3) direct contamination of another person (both times obviously the spouse) and transfer of the same duration of impurity, which points to the same cause of impurity (v. 18: unintended, uncontrollable seminal emission, one day; v. 24: unintended, uncontrollable menstruation, seven days).

(8) If v. 18 would point to sexual intercourse, the woman would be missing in the man’s “defilement list” and the parallelism would be destroyed. Furthermore, any allusion of a possible defilement of humans would be missing.

(9) The chapter’s summary in vv. 32f. does not contain any allusion to sexuality. To the contrary, it clearly shows that the content of the whole chapter just deals with unintended, uncontrollable discharges and their respective impurities.

(10) Until chapter 18 there is no reference to sexuality at all. Finally, chapter 18 contains a lengthy list of sexual impurities that are altogether not

to be purified (but to be sentenced to death). The terms “defiling” or “unclean,” therefore, are not employed referring to sexuality before that chapter and are only used to describe illegal relationships or improper times of intercourse (i.e. during menstruation).

(11) The kind of expression and the word order in Lev 15:18 (as well as in v. 24) are not explicit enough to allude clearly to sexuality, especially when compared to chapters 18 and 20. To the contrary, it adequately fits the demands of a simple defilement list with an impurity accidentally and inadvertently caused while simply sleeping.

(12) The use of the construction $\text{בְּשָׁנָה} + \text{אֶחָד}$ in Lev 15:18 (and v. 24), if embedded in a context of sexuality, would result in the conclusion that it speaks about forced sex. Nothing at all in Lev 15 supports this assumption. To the contrary, Lev 15 does not deal with *morality*, sin, and proper punishments, but just with *ritual* (im-)purity. Consequently, other instances of the OT using $\text{בְּשָׁנָה} + \text{אֶחָד}$ (without sexual context) must determine the meaning of this expression in Lev 15:18 (and v. 24): Simple, usual *sleep*, as supported e.g. by 2 Sam 4:5—and many others speaking about the *sleep* of the dead (e.g. 2 Sam 7:12; Ezek 31:18; 32:19.27-30).

(13) A textual hint or at least some reasonable explanation for the incomprehensible insertion of an ordinance concerning sexuality within a completely different context and (the resulting) improper structure is still missing.

(14) A satisfying explanation for the supposed impurity is still missing, especially under consideration of the Edenic ideal (Gen 2:24; 1 Cor 6:16f.; Eph 5:31f.), the divine command to multiply (Gen 1:28; cf. Ps 127:3), and the usage of terms connoting sexual intimacy in context of Yahweh’s relationship with Israel.

(15) Finally, it is odd that there is nowhere any concrete, unambiguous ordinance in another (much more adequate) context commanding priests and/or common Israelites to shun the sanctuary at least for one day after having sexual relations with one’s spouse. While there are different precautions to be taken that are explicated in detail, there is nowhere any hint at sexuality as a means of preventing a person to approach God.

To sum up, it might be concluded that the whole chapter deals with *unintended* impurities caused by *uncontrollable* bodily discharges and communicated *by contact*. There is no hint given to reason that, all of a sudden, v. 18 is completely different, dealing with impurity *deliberately*

GEHRING: INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 15:18

caused by a mutual *action* that is *controllable*. Consequently, if Lev 15:18 does not speak about sexual intercourse and thus does not attach any impurity to legal sexuality, there is no other allusion left in the whole biblical (and particularly Old Testament) account to be used as proof text for this most problematic cause of impurity. The texts of Exod 19:14f., 1 Sam 21:4f. (and 2 Sam 11:11) as well as the rather general hints on personal consecration perhaps in context of the great Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29.31; 23:27.29.32), have no connection to Lev 15:16-24 and do not point to sexuality as reason for the need of purification and abstinence (from women).

This interpretation not only solves the problem of explaining the impurity, which is not satisfyingly accomplished yet as most commentators candidly admit. It even more contributes to the initial, Edenic ideal as established in paradise (Gen 2:24), spiritually applied in the Old Testament symbolism, and finally transferred to the “great mystery” of Eph 5:31f. and the “one spirit” (ἐν πνεύμα) union of 1 Cor 6:16f. Similar to these instances, the author of Hebrews defends the purity of conjugal sexuality in Heb 13:4, most likely including any supposed ritual defilement. The holy marriage ideal is used by Yahweh, Jesus, the prophets, and some of the apostles for explaining in figurative as well as in most practical terms the intimacy not only spouses are privileged to experience, but what even more God desires to share with his followers as a spiritual union. And that great holy union is not impure, but “honorable [... and] undefiled/pure” τίμιος [... καὶ] ἀμίαντος; Heb 13:4) in its highest and deepest sense.

René Gehring is pastor at Bogenhofen (Austria) and guest lecturer at different universities. He received a Ph.D. in theology in 2011 (Dissertation: “The Biblical ‘One Flesh’ Theology of Marriage as Constituted in Genesis 2:24: An Exegetical Study of this Human-Divine Covenant Pattern, Its New Testament Echoes, and Its Reception History throughout Scripture,” Wipf & Stock 2013). Since 2009 he holds a Ph.D. in history (Dissertation: “Die antiken jüdischen Religionsparteien. Essener, Pharisäer, Sadduzäer, Zeloten und Therapeuten.” Schriften der Forschung: Historische Theologie, Bd. 2, Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen, St.Peter/Hart 2012). In the same year he received an M.A. in Ancient History and Classics, with a main emphasis on ancient Greek philosophy and Jewish studies.
r.gehring@adventisten.at