SOTER 2020.73 (101)
ISSN 1392-7450 (Print), ISSN 2335-8785 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8785.73(101).1

TEOLOGIJA IR FILOSOFIJA

Algirdas AKELAITIS
Vytautas Magnus University
Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas

The Practice and Experience of the Menstrual Rituals in the Ancient Israel

SUMMARY. The religious life of women in ancient Israel is depicted only scarcely in the Bible. Thus, it is of interest that the prescriptions for purification after menstruation is given explicit ritual attention in the Old Testament. Yet even in these passages the religious activities of women are mainly viewed and presented from the male perspective (e. g. their "impurity" and inability to participate in cult etc.). Is it possible to gather at least some reliable data about the practice and experience of the menstrual rituals in Ancient Israel?

KEYWORDS: menstruation, feminist Biblical interpretation, rituals, Ancient Israel, Hebrew term *niddah*.

Any investigation that seeks to analyze the religious activities of women in the ancient Israel encounters the problem in that we are lacking unmediated primary reports which would inform us objectively how women interpreted, participated and, possibly, were involved creatively in such actions. The notions of the religious life of women are mostly "hidden" behind or represented in the context of the ritual / religious activities of men, which makes difficult to evaluate women's actual participation in ritual or religious actions. In such a context the prescriptions concerning the menstrual period and purification following menstruation appears to be one of the few cases where the specific aspect of women's life is "given explicit ritual attention"[1].

An overview presented in this paper will proceed in three steps. First, we will overview the biblical evidence and basic terminology related to the definition of menstruation and Jewish menstrual law. Then we will approach the question whether it is plausible to suggest that such kind of rituals existed in the ancient Israel. Finally, we

[1] See Phyllis Ann Bird, "Women", *ABD* 6, 955.

will attempt to speculate on the problem of the actual involvement of women in such ritual activities and basic characteristics of their experience.

The biblical evidence

The Hebrew term used for menstruation in the Jewish menstrual law is *niddāh.* This feminine noun occurs 29 times in the OT. There are two main proposals about its etymology[2]:

a) to see it as derived from the root *ndd (to flee, escape, wander;* cf. Psa 31:11; Isa 21:15; Hos 7:13 etc.);

b) to see it in connection with the root *ndh* (only in piel: *to push away, exclude;* see Isa 66:5; Amo 6:3)[3].

It is possible to identify three types of meanings of *niddāh,* considering the contexts in which it is used:

a) When *niddāh* occurs in the contexts of guilt (cf. Lev 20:21, see *ḥeṯ'ām* in v. 20), inappropriateness (cf. "their golds as *niddāh"* in Eze 7:19), or abomination (cf. Lam 1:17), it seems to be understood as denoting the "impurity" in general[4].

b) On the other hand, the expression *mê niddāṯ (the waters of niddāh;* see Num 19:9.13.20.21, 31:23) seems to denote the "waters of purification"[5] rather than "waters of impurity" (see also Zec 13:1).

c) The most numerous group of occurrences includes those instances where *niddāh* is used as a technical term for the menstruating woman (cf. Lev 15:19–20.33), the woman with an abnormal discharge of blood (cf. Lev 15:25–26) and the one after childbirth (cf. Lev 12:2.5). Similar impurity is applied to a man through the intercourse with the menstruating woman (cf. Lev 15:24).

[2] See discussions in: Hannah K. Harrington, *The Purity Texts* (CQS; London, 2004), 101; and Kathleen O'Grady, "The Semantics of Taboo: Menstrual Prohibitions in the Hebrew Bible", in *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity,* ed. K. De Troyer (London, 2003), 15–16.

[3] This is first suggested by Rashi in his commentary on Num 19:9 (he proposes to see this root in connection with *nzh* (*to spatter*). It might be added that the Targumim use the term *bᵉriḥûqah* (in her being distant/separated) while translating *niddāh*. This, however, seems to be a later development of the concept, as there are no indications of the woman being separated or excluded from normal life in the biblical text. There seems to be only one reference to the separation of the menstruant in Talmud (cf. Niddah 7:4).

[4] Meacham suggests that this cluster of meanings might have influenced the latter legal and emotional interpretations of the state of menstruation, "adding to the original sense of distancing or separation". Tirzah Meacham, "Female Purity (Niddah)", *Jewish Women's Archive*, jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/female-purity-niddah.

[5] See Milgrom's discussion on the *mê ḥaṭṭā't* (Num 8:7) in: Jacob B. Milgrom, "Sin-offering or purificationoffering?", *VT* 21/2 (1971), 237. Basing his proposal on contextual, morphological and etymological grounds he suggests the translation "waters of 'purifying function'" as more accurate, than the widely accepted "waters of expiation". Relating to this analysis, Milgrom-Wright suggest the meaning "purification" for niddah in the expression *mê niddāṯ* as well.

Although the menstruation and impurity caused by it is mentioned in nonpriestly texts[6], it is the book of Leviticus (i. e. the priestly writer) that presents these matters systematically. The *niddāh* regulations that are listen in Lev 15 occur in the context of the laws of purity (cf. Lev 11–15)[7]. The prohibition of sexual intercourse with the menstruant is stated in Lev 18:19 and 20:18. It is worth noticing that *niddāh,* as a technical term which denotes the menstruating woman, seems to have no corresponding equivalent in reference to the male[8].

Although the categories of "purity" and "impurity" are generally understood as denoting a state which permits (or forbids) the person to approach the area of divine presence, in the context of Lev 12 and 15 Levine proposes that "in ancient usage 'pure' and 'impure' correspond to what in modern health care would be referred to as 'immune' and 'susceptible', respectively"[9]. The generally accepted meaning of *niddāh* is also challenged by Neusner with an indication that the regulations of *niddāh* which are found in the Priestly Code, appear to be kept not only by those who were intending to go to the Temple. He proposes that this law is to be understood as protecting YHWH's Tabernacle which is *in the middle of His people* (cf. Lev 15:31). Thus, the protection of the Tabernacle from being defiled was to be applied for the people as well; i.e. Israel must be "clean" because YHWH's Tabernacle is in their midst[10].

The two parts of Lev 15 (namely: vv. 1–18, which refers to the male discharges, and vv. 19–30 which constitute a female counterpart, with vv. 31–33 functioning as a summary) might be seen as separate units. Some scholars, however, find the current structure of the chapter rather instructive. There are noticeable similarities between the male and female sections of the regulations: both mention normal and abnormal discharges, both use quiet similar vocabulary etc.

One of the lines of interpretation follows the possible connection between the menstruation and fertility. On the male part the discharge is called *zerāʿ* i. e. "seed,

6 See, for example: Gen 18:11–12, 31:35; 2 Sa 11:2–4; Isa 30:22, 64:5, Lam 1:17 etc.

7 See a synthetic and instructive overview of niddah laws in: Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: The essential texts, their history, and their relevance for today* (New York, 1995), 150–151.

8 See also Milgrom's proposal that the participles *zāb* and *zāḇāh* are to be seen as technical terms for "the one with a discharge". Jacob B. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3; New York, 1991), 906. It is to be noted, however, that these terms are used for those with abnormal discharge.

9 Cf. Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus. The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPSTC; Philadelphia, 1989), 249. See also his remark (p. 97) that *niddāh* in Lev 15:19 "does not connote impurity in and of itself, but, rather, describes the physiological process of the flow of blood". Hieke also proposes the translation "exclusion" and "excretion", referring to the menstruant, or to the blood discharge itself. Thomas Hieke, *Levitikus 1–15* (HThKAT; Freiburg, 2014), 538. Douglas states that this kind of impurity is "a matter of territorial definition". Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as literature* (Oxford, 1999), 181.

10 The case is quite opposite. Neither women with (ir)regular discharge, nor those after childbirth could visit the Temple before they go through the rituals of purification. Cf. Jacob Neusner, "From Scripture to Mishnah: The Origins of Tractate Niddah", *JJS* 29/2 (1978), 135, 142–143.

semen", in the case of female it is *dām* "blood"[11]. Meacham suggests the link with Lev 12 where the conception is referred to as *tazrîa'* (feminine hiphil imperfect of *zr'),* which is clearly a woman's "action", or "being acted upon". While it is possible to read this verbal form as denoting physical condition[12], usually hiphil is understood as a causative form of the verb (i. e. "woman who seminates"). If we accept the latter meaning the text would permit the connection between menstrual blood and fertility[13]. The concept that a woman participates in the conception rather actively, seems to have been widely known in the ANE[14].

It is indicated by many that the section of female *niddāh* (v. 19) has no statement about the procedure of purification for the woman with a regular discharge[15]. It seems that the Bible denotes only the period of waiting for the woman herself (v. 19), although for those who have been contaminated by her the bathing (and in some cases washing of the clothes) is prescribed as a part of purification ritual (cf. v. 21). There are numerous scholars proposing that some ritual (bathing and / or laundering) is to be assumed[16]. Meacham, however, proposes that the rituals of washing / laundering might have been non-existent because of the possible lack of water[17]. The ritual regulations for women are indicated in the texts of Qumran (cf. 4Q514 5–6). They were significantly developed in the rabbinic period also[18].

There is one more aspect, which comes to the fore while comparing two lists of regulations. While it is understandable why the female part omits the regulations of riding, extending of hand and spitting (which are mainly the actions reserved to men;

[11] Cook proceeds to develop on this terminology, suggesting the symbolic meaningfulness of blood. See Leslie A. Cook, "Body Language. Women's Rituals of Purification in the Bible and Mishnah", in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law,* ed. R. R. Wasserfall (1999), 52–53. Philip, however, argues that the difference between the impure blood from the womb and other types of blood is not to be overlooked: "No use of menstrual blood for any purposes is mentioned in the Bible, as opposed to some other cultures in which it is used for medical and fertilizing purposes". Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible. Fertility and Impurity* (StBL 88; New York, 2006), 69. For her it is a proof that the impurity of the menstrual blood "was taken as inherent".

[12] Cf. Levine, *Leviticus*, 73. He supports his argument with the Samaritan version which probably reads *tizzara'* (i. e. niphal): "she shall be inseminated".

[13] Cf. Meacham, "Niddah". This proposal might be supported by the widely recognized chiastic pattern of Lev 15, where the male and female discharges are presented symmetrically with the coitus (as a union of male and female genitals) occurring in the central position (v. 18). See discussions in: Deborah Ellens, "Menstrual Impurity and Innovation in Leviticus 15", in *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity*, ed. K. De Troyer (London, 2003), 36–37; and Philip, *Menstruation*, 45–47.

[14] See illuminating presentation and discussion in: Marten Stol - Franz A. M. Wiggermann, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (CM 14; Groningen, 2000), 5–8.

[15] Such a procedure is prescribed for the male with a normal discharge in Lev 15:16.

[16] See, for example: Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 934–935.

[17] Cf. Tirzah Meacham, "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws", in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed. R. R. Wasserfall (London, 1999), 28. This, however, does not explain why bathing / laundering was prescribed for all those who came into contact with the menstruating woman and became impure.

[18] See the comparison chart in: Harrington, *The Purity Texts*, 136–137.

cf. Lev 15:8-11), the silence of Lev 15 concerning food preparation and other basic duties related to the keeping of a household is noticeably asymmetric. Gerstenberger, basing his proposal on these features, suggests that the text as we have it, demonstrates the characteristically male perspective. Hence, the female impurity is viewed and dealt with primarily as a possible source of threat to the men's purity. The regulations (and opportunities to rest from housework and / or sexual demands of men) for women remain hidden from the reader[19].

There are, however, some questions that remain on the level of speculation: why the blood of menstruation is considered impure? What about the female activity during the period of menstruation? How these regulations were (if at all) actually experienced by the women? Although some of these questions might remain unanswered[20], we will attempt to approach two topics in the following sections: a) were the rituals or regulations related to the menstruation practiced / known in the ancient Israel? b) how did women experience these rituals in their lives?

Were the menstruation rules / rituals existent in the ancient Israel?

Although we have no sources from the earliest stages of Israel's history about the menstrual regulations, some data from the ANE civilizations, cross-cultural studies, even from the Bible itself and the latter development of menstrual laws might provide us with some useful insights. We must be aware of the danger of circular argument, while reviewing examples from the ANE, as stated by Philip: "The sources are few, diverse, and broken, and one has to be very careful not to suppose that the better-known Israeli beliefs and practices have a lot in common with their ancient Near East parallels"[21]. On the other hand, the matters of menstruating women, being related to the realm of fertility and procreation[22], were by no means unimportant in the ancient world. We must ask, however, whether the menstruating women were considered "unclean" and subordinated to some kind of regulations[23].

There are some evidences from the ANE texts that the menstruating women were considered "unclean" with some accompanying regulations prescribed. One must

[19] Cf. Edward S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus. A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY, 1996), 203–204.

[20] For example, the question of why the menstruation blood is seen as impure. For some scholars it is because its connection with fertility, for others – because its vicinity with death symbolism. See also Douglas' proposal of correlative interpretation of the system of rules which functions through the hierarchized and linked analogies: Douglas, *Leviticus*, 18-19.

[21] Philip, *Menstruation,* 7.

[22] See discussion in: Stol, *Birth*, 12–14.

[23] For example, in the stories of "Enki and Ninmah" (151–166), and "Enlil and Ninlil" (167–180), the matters of the childbirth are not connected with any kind of impurity. Cf. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once... Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven, CT, 1987), 151–180. See discussion in: Philip, *Menstruation*, 5.

remember, however, that the texts that often surface in the discussion about the menstrual regulations are not without problems.

The Babylonian term *mussukatu,* which might mean "a woman under taboo" (cf. *asakku),* sometimes is seen as referring to a menstruating woman. Jacobsen, however, is one among many who proposes different interpretation of this term[24]. Van der Toorn argues that it is a "rather general term comprehending the woman in the period after she has given birth, the one who has not yet washed after sexual intercourse, and also the menstruating woman"[25]. This uncleanness appears to have been transmittable[26].

Weidner was first to publish the Harem Decrees from the Middle-Assyrian period. He proposed that a designation "the woman who should not be approached" refers to a menstruant in this text. Hence, the menstruating woman was not permitted to approach the person (i.e. the king) involved in the ritual activity[27]. While Van der Toorn suggested the idea that even visual contact with the menstruant would have harmed the purity of the cult[28], Philip is more cautious and states that "one cannot learn from this specific text dealing with the king serving in the cult about the everyday life rules concerning menstruation, and even more, about the king's life when he was not serving in the cult"[29].

In his commentary on the Sumerian proverb "May her bread be (as) bread (made by an) unclean (woman), and no man eat it!" Jacobsen suggested that it refers to the restriction of bread-making during periods of menstruation[30]. Marsman suggests that such customs were present among the Hittites as well[31]. Smith cites some evidences from the ancient Arab world that the women during the period of menstruation (especially the girls at their first menstruation) were confined to a hut or tent at the outskirts of the encampment[32].

[24] While analyzing the myth of Enlil and Ninlil, he translates this term with the word "ravisher" but agrees that the meaning of it is "somewhat more general: 'one who is under a taboo relating to matters of sex'". Cf. Thorkild Jacobsen, "Mesopotamia: The Cosmos As a State", in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, ed. H. Frankfort - H. A. Frankfort - T. Jacobsen, et al. (OIE, London, 1977), 153.

[25] See discussion in: Karel Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia. A Comparative Study* (SSN 22; Assen, 1985), 31.

[26] Cf. CAD 10.239: "If a man touches a *musukkatu* woman who is passing by, for six days [he will not be pure]". The end of this passage (presented in the brackets), however, is lost. Hence, the interpretation of this text is very difficult.

[27] See Ernst Friedrich Weidner, "Hof- und Harems-Erlasse assyrischer Konige aus dem 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.", *AfO* 17/1 (1954), 276.

[28] Cf. Karel Van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman* (BS 23; Sheffield, 1994), 51.

[29] Philip, *Menstruation,* 7.

[30] Thorkild Jacobsen, "Notes on Selected Sayings", in *Sumerian Proverbs: Glimpses of Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia,* ed. E. I. Gordon (Philadelphia, 1959), 457. See discussion in: Toorn, *Sin*, 31.

[31] Cf. Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (OTS 49; Leiden, 2003), 489.

[32] Cf. William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. First Series: The Fundamental*

Moreover, there are instances in the Bible, outside the priestly literal corpus, where the menstruating women are mentioned. In Gen 18:11 Sarah's menopause is referred to in relation to her (in)ability to become pregnant. Rachel's case (Gen 31:35) is also interesting, because she is permitted not to stand-up in front of her father (against the supposed etiquette rules), and because such a behavior seems to be accepted by her father as "normal"[33]. 2 Sa 11:4 mentions Bathsheba purifying herself from the impurity of menstruation. While *niddāh* in Lam 1:17 might be interpreted metaphorically, as a synonym of uncleanness[34], the "lady Jerusalem" might be seen as a separated menstruating woman also[35]. These instances, of course, do not permit any generalizations. But we see that the references to the menstruation and menstruating women are spread throughout the Bible – the Pentateuch, prophetic and late (cf. 2 Ch 29:5, where *niddāh* is used almost as a synonym of *tm')* writings.

Finally, there is a well-attested fact that in the rabbinic period (when many Temple-related rules of ritual purity were abandoned) the menstrual laws not only remained in force, but even "became more restrictive in the private sphere, chiefly in areas concerning physical separation from one's spouse and internal examinations"[36]. Talmud even has a separate tractate named *Niddah*[37]. There are abundant passages and references to these matters in the rabbinic *Responsa*.

Moreover, such regulations and customs (as confirmed by many anthropological studies) are still observed in some less modernized communities, where they function mainly in social and religious spheres. Gottlieb in her study of the menstrual cosmology among the Beng of Ivory Coast indicated that the menstruation there is viewed rather as a symbol of human fertility, than as a "source of threat to men, or polluting in general"[38]. The similar phenomenon is observed by Appell among the Rungus of Borneo, where the menstruant is not considered unclean or polluting[39]. The Beng consider

Institutions (London, 2009), 448.

33 Philip argues that this might indicate the existence of a well-known custom, and that daughter's mentioning her menstruation while speaking with her father was seen as a natural phenomenon. See discussion in: Philip, *Menstruation*, 22–24. Van der Toorn states that "the train of thought" behind these ideas might have been "deeply rooted in the Israelite experience". Toorn, *Cradle*, 53.

34 The common judgment-related context is indicated by House, together with Isa 30:22, 64:5; Eze 7:19 and Ezr 9:11. Cf. Paul R. House, *Lamentations* (WBC 23B; Nashville, 2004), 361.

35 Cf. Barbara Bakke Kaiser, "Poet as 'Female Impersonator': The Image of Daughter Zion as Speaker in Biblical Poems of Suffering", JR 67/2 (1987), 175–176. See also Toorn, *Cradle*, 53.

36 See Meacham, "Niddah". Cf. also Biale's formulation: "the *niddāh* retained its legal significance for woman's intimate relationship with her husband but lost its importance in the arena of woman's contact with other members of her family and with strangers". Biale, *Women*, 148.

37 Cook suggests that this is an indication that the rabbis wanted to emphasize menstruations as a ritual issue. See the discussion on continuity and differences between Lev 15 and the rabbinic regulations as well. Cook, "Language", 59–60.

38 This might be related to the fact that there is no ritual required to regain the purity after the menstruation. Cf. Alma Gottlieb, "Menstrual Cosmology Among the Beng of Ivory Coast", in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation,* ed. T. C. T. Buckley-A. Gottlieb (Berkeley, 1988), 59, 73.

39 Cf. Laura W. R. Appell, "Menstruation Among the Rungus of Borneo: An Unmarked Category", in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation,* ed. T. C. T. Buckley-A. Gottlieb (Berkeley, 1988), 110.

menstrual blood polluting in relation to the Earth only. Thus, the only activity that is forbidden for the menstruating woman is working in the forest[40]. The female priestesses of Rungus have to observe some purity regulations as well (e.g. avoid the possible contact with human or animal feces), in order to vouchsafe the success communication with the spirits[41]. It is often observed by the Authors of the anthropological studies that the menstrual regulations might function in favor of the women, rather than as an instrument of their suppression or devaluation[42].

Thus, it seems possible to formulate a statement about the possibility of the regulations and customs related to the menstruation in the ancient Israel:

a) There are evidences from the surrounding cultures of the ANE matching, or even preceding the period of the ancient Israel, where customs and regulations referring to the menstruation are attested.

b) In the Old Testament there are instances where the theme of menstruation is treated in different ways: priestly regulations, narratives lamentations etc. It is possible to suggest some well-known customs or even regulations behind these texts.

c) There is a high level of consistence and even elaboration attested in the post-biblical period of Judaism, concerning the regulations related to menstruation.

d) The existence of menstrual regulations and customs is attested crossculturally in the less-modernized societies, but these regulations are not always connected with the concept of "uncleanness".

Chronologically this type of evidences reaches back to the civilizations of the Ancient Near East. On the other hand, the survival and successful adaptation of these regulations in Israel during the dramatic period of transition from Temple- to post-Temple period is confirmed by the existence and biblical character of the menstrual regulations in the Mishnaic period. Thus, it is possible to speak about the consistence of such regulations in the culture of Israel, at least in those periods for which we have reachable data to. Hence, it seems sound and logical to suggest that there might have been customs and / or regulations in the ancient Israel, before the centralization of the

She further speculates (p. 112), that the lack of regulations might be related to the "general reticence about all sexual matters, for fear of supernatural sanctions".

40 The Earth, however, appears to be vulnerable and "might be polluted by many substances and actions". Cf. Gottlieb, "Cosmology", 61. She indicates (p. 58), that there seem to be no other rules that would isolate the menstruating woman from the social and / or ritual life and would restrict her activities (e. g. cooking).

41 Appell, "Rungus", 110.

42 E. g. Gottlieb notes that among the Beng the regulations "serve to give added value to a major aspect of women's labor – that of cooking"; Gottlieb, "Cosmology", 55. Appel suggests that the absence of the restrictions for the menstruating women supports the "gender symmetry" among the Rungus of Borneo; See Appell, "Rungus", 112. Lawrence in the study of the customs in the rural Portugal observes that the menstrual regulations are "in individual women's interests rather than means of their suppression" and serve the women for "achieving economic and political ascendancy within their neighborhoods"; Denise L. Lawrence, "Menstrual Politics: Women and Pigs in Rural Portugal", *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation,* ed. T. C. T. Buckley-A. Gottlieb) (Berkeley, 1988), 113.

cult was introduced[43]. It might be speculated even, that those customs or rules were less masculinized (i. e. less dependent on male religious specialists) than in the latter stages of Israelite religion[44].

The experience of the women

It seems to be useful to remember Douglas' statement that: "We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body"[45]. Together with Turner's proposal to take a "structure of positions" as the basic model of society[46] we might suggest that the rituals related to the period of woman's menstruation in more primitive societies functioned not only as a private matter, but also as a powerful communal symbol. Moreover, as indicated by Lamoreaux, the status of a person is to be seen in connection with person's relation with the surrounding community. Thus, the change of the former cannot be separated from the change of the latter[47]. Hence, we must keep in mind that the "status" of the menstruant in the personal sphere is linked with the "integration" of the woman in the social realm.

The *transformative* force of the ritual, well-indicated by Eller[48], is valid for the regulations related to the menstruation as well. It is the ritual that introduces the change, rather than being only an informative sign or celebration of the change that occurred. Now in the primitive societies it was the community (rather than a document) that, being a competent witness to the ritual, acknowledged the successful transition and change (or restoration) of the status[49]. Hence, while speaking about the experiences of women, related to the menstruation rituals, we must keep in mind the question of how these women identified themselves as the members of their society in broader or narrower (e. g. the temporary group of women that become connected by means of the status of menstruant) sense. While we are not able to elaborate on this most interesting

[43] The rules in Lev 15 do not mention any approval or inspection by the religious authority (e.g. priest), which would be required after the prescribed period of time has ended. It is easy to imagine this order in the context of a local shrine, where the woman herself (or in the circle of other women) acts as a "religious specialist".

[44] Cook indicates that the introduction of the rabbi as an expert on menstrual blood and as the authority to be consulted by women is one of the "innovations" found in the rabbinic law, as compared to the biblical rules. Cf. Cook, "Language", 61.

[45] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1985), 114.

[46] Cf. Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (New York, NY, 1967), 93.

[47] See Jason T. Lamoreaux, *Ritual, Women, and Philippi: Reimagining the Early Philippian Community* (Eugene, OR, 2013), 31.

[48] Cf. Jack David Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion* (New York, NY, 2014), 124.

[49] Lamoreaux, *Ritual*, 30.

topic, we will indicate some aspects that surface in the anthropological investigations and rabbinic literature, which might suggest the active and creative attitude of women towards the menstrual regulations[50].

It seems plausible that the status ascribed to the women by the society (daughter, wife, mother, etc.) was cherished and accepted by women themselves as means of their self-definition and identification. Regarding the liminal period, as indicated by many, the loss of the former status and entering the endangered and dangerous state is one of the most prominent features in the "rites of the passage". Thus it is possible to speculate that this crisis of "no-former-status" functioned on the personal level as well, provoking the "highly specific type" of relations (usually marked by the equality), among those who were in the liminal state[51].

In this context it is possible to indicate the social dimension of such an experience. The words of one Ethiopian informant appear to be an illuminating example of it: "In Ethiopia everyone knows right away if I am pregnant because I don't go to the menstruation hut anymore; the neighbors count three shabbat, four shabbat, then one month, two months, and they ask me: 'Why don't you go outside [to the menstrual hut]?' and I answer that I don't know that the blood will come"[52]. Moreover, analyzing the processes in the same community Cicurel-Sharaby indicated also that the preservation of the menstrual regulations among the immigrants resulted in the temporary reverse of gender roles during the menstruation period[53]. It is observed by Lawrence that the menstrual regulations in the rural Portugal "contributed to a woman's control of her own and her household's social networks as well as to household privacy"[54]. Again, Skultans hypothesizes that her informants did "identify their own reproductive processes with their particular perceptions of their social roles"[55]. Similar examples are identified by many anthropologists. On the other hand, it is obvious that the changes in the social sphere (including the system of symbols, communication, values etc.)

[50] For example, there is a widespread opinion that these regulations were meant to separate the menstruant which was seen as dangerous or / and offensive, and might indicate the lower status of a woman. See, however, among others, Buckley-Gottlieb's suggestion that these regulations might "restrict the behavior of others more than that of the menstruating woman herself' and "might function as a protection of the menstruous woman's spirituality, ensuring her own autonomy and social control". Thomas C. T. Buckley - Alma Gottlieb, "A Critical Appraisal of Theories of Menstrual Symbolism", *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, ed. T. C. T. Buckley - A. Gottlieb (Berkeley, 1988), 7, 9.

[51] Cf. Turner, *Symbols*, 99.

[52] See Lisa Anteby, "'There's Blood in the House': Negotiating Female Rituals of Purity Among Ethiopian Jews in Israel", *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law,* ed. R. R. Wasserfall (London, 1999), 178.

[53] Such an important shift took place exactly because of the change of social context. While in Ethiopia it was the community that supported the family of the menstruant, in Israel the relations within the community changed and it was the man that was to take place of the woman and fulfill domestic duties. See discussion in: Inbal Cicurel – Rachel Sharaby, "Women in the menstruation huts: variations in preserving purification customs among Ethiopian immigrants", *JFSR* 23/2 (2007), 84.

[54] Cf. Lawrence, "Politics", 135.

[55] Vieda Skultans, "Menstrual Symbolism in South Wales", *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation,* ed. T. C. T. Buckley - A. Gottlieb (Berkeley, 1988), 139.

cause the changes in practice and perception of the menstrual regulations, as indicated, for example, by the studies among the Ethiopian Jews after their immigration in Israel.

Speaking about the ancient Israel it seems plausible to propose that the social context in the primitive community (smaller size, lower degree of anonymity, higher stability of roles) might have supported the experience and practice of the menstrual rituals as a part of the social life, while in the modern communities (larger size, higher degree of anonymity, changing boundaries of roles[56]) the shift towards the privacy seems to become dominant considering the menstrual periods. Moreover, if it is true that menstruation was seen as related to the procreation, then by no means one could say that these matters were at the margins of the social life, or that it was of little importance regarding the women's self-identification in the context of their community and household.

The question of how these regulations were experienced on personal level seems to be almost unanswerable. The inaccessibility of the objective and unmediated data is only one problem. Even more important is the dependence of the concepts and symbols that are used for communication, on the worldview of the person and culture that person lives in[57]. The categories of oppression, danger, power, and similar, might have functioned differently in the ancient Israel[58].

One example, however, seems to fit this section of our analysis. In the rabbinic literature we find some passages that reflect the creativity of women concerning the ritual regulations during the menstrual period. Biale cites the discussion in Ketubot 61a, where it is indicated that the wives of some rabbis have found the ways of getting around the *niddāh* regulations. She argues that the gestures (for example, placing the cup, otherwise forbidden, with the left hand, or in an unusual spot) become a "private code" of symbols that both husband and wife understand. While being fully aware of the special

[56] It is noteworthy how the gender roles changed among the Ethiopian Jews. After the immigration the level of secularization heightened and consequently the males whose status was dependent on the religious authority lost their importance. The females, on the contrary, not only did not lose their prominent role in the household, but also gained more opportunities in the social sphere (e. g. possibilities to seek education).

[57] As an example, we might cite Anteby's personal note on her reaction, while having been called "a cursed woman" by one of the informants - it took some effort to transcend the difference between the contents and connotations of the expression as used in different worldviews. See Anteby, "Blood", 180.

[58] See, for example, the splendid discussion about the problems concerning the usage of the term taboo in: Buckley-Gottlieb, "Theories", 7–8. It is worth to cite a rather lengthy conclusion of Hartman-Marmon, after they have indicated the danger of "overvoicing" the informants by means of abstraction and systematization: "By listening in this way, we could hear the women's thoughts and experiences move beyond the schematic abstractions of prevailing concepts and into a highly textured range of responses. By refusing to implicate them on an axis of collaboration-resistance, or to locate them within a simple oppression-empowerment dichotomy, we were better able to hear the ways in which they manage a broad range of voices at times in concert, at times in conflict, and at times content merely to coexist." Tova Hartman – Naomi Marmon, "Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions: Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Jewish Women", *GS* 18/3 (2004), 405.

distancing and separation imposed by the menstrual rules, they choose / agree to introduce a subtle alteration, rather than complete elimination of these regulations[59]. The similar glimpse at the religious life of Jewish women (again, from the rabbinic perspective) surfaces in the polemics against the "irregular" practices related to the menstrual regulations (e. g. immersing in warm water, washing in baths, or sprinkling themselves instead of immersing). The texts, however, reflect that these women thought of themselves as observing the rules, and of their customs – as legitimate[60]. Somewhat similar "creativity" is observed in the communities of the Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia, where it is clear that some women take an initiative to preserve (with some necessary alterations, caused by the changing environments) the purity regulations[61].

In our opinion the women's ability to innovate (i.e. to "ritualize" the altered, or even new menstrual practices) and their readiness to preserve the menstrual regulations seem to be consistent features in the researches and documents that we have come across in our analysis. Moreover, the personal dimension in the experience of menstruation seems to become more dominant in the modernizing communities. Hence, it is plausible that such regulations (if existent in the ancient Israel), were experienced by the women as the form of behavior that was capable to express and communicate their own identity.

Finally, we must turn to the religious dimension of the experience of menstrual regulations. In this context Eller's remark that not all the rituals should be necessary religious, is to be taken seriously[62]. We must ask, therefore, whether these rituals might have been experienced by the women in the ancient Israel as the expression of their religious attitudes.

Again, the research that was performed among the Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia might be instructive. It was indicated by Anteby that it was the *religious behavior* of the women, that served as one of the major determinants of the group identity, so that group was able to distinguish itself from the non-Jewish Ethiopians. Moreover, she cites the informant who described their situation in Israel (where they were not able to observe the menstrual rituals) as living "like the Christians in Ethiopia" (i. e. those who do not observe menstrual regulations)[63].

Hence, while it is plausible to think about the variety of ritual activities in the pre-Temple (i. e. pre-centralized) cultic system of the ancient Israel, the existence of the

[59] See Biale, *Women*, 160.

[60] Cf. Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of 'Incorrect' Purification practices", *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law,* ed. R. R. Wasserfall (1999), 96–97.

[61] See the indications of different behavior, depending on the living ambience (e. g. the hotel, mobile caravans, apartaments): Anteby, "Blood", 168–169, 182.

[62] Cf. Eller, *Anthropology*, 123.

[63] Cf. Anteby, "Blood", 178. In addition, Cicurel-Sharaby indicate that the ethnic function of the menstrual regulations among the Ethiopian immigrants also expresses the religious opposition toward the Western (i. e. modern Israeli) society. Cicurel-Sharaby, "Women", 83.

menstrual regulations functioning as religious group-defining ritual is at least possible. For example, Cohen cites the case where the local women in Romania opposed one man's wife claiming that her custom to immerse was not the custom in their place[64]. Such cases seem to be more than possible in the context of the local shrine where the ritual practices vary from place to place and are easily recognized as identifying person's "belonging" to one or the other community[65].

Hence, with all cautiousness it still seems possible to speculate that in the ritual context of the ritually non-yet-centralized ancient Israel, the menstrual regulations and rituals were existent and functioned in social, personal and religious spheres. While the specific features or characteristics of those actions remain yet unveiled, the cross-cultural and anthropological studies seem to be able to provide some illuminating proposals. The crucial events that shaped the identity of Israel (centralization of the cult, the Temple, exile, destruction of the second Temple, etc.) influenced the rituals and their meanings as well. The survival and successful adaptation of the menstrual rituals to the changing realities (attested in Judaism up to the modern times) might be seen as a sign of their multifaceted importance.

LITERATURE AND SOURCES

1. Anteby, Lisa. "'There's Blood in the House': Negotiating Female Rituals of Purity Among Ethiopian Jews in Israel". In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law.* Ed. R. R. Wasserfall, 166–186. London, 1999.
2. Appell, Laura W. R. "Menstruation Among the Rungus of Borneo: An Unmarked Category". In *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation.* Ed. T. C. T. Buckley - A. Gottlieb, 94–116. Berkeley, 1988.
3. Biale, Rachel. *Women and Jewish Law: The essential texts, their history, and their relevance for today*. New York, 1995.
4. Bird, Phyllis Ann. "Women". *ABD* 6: 947–961.
5. Buckley, Thomas C. T. - Gottlieb, Alma. "A Critical Appraisal of Theories of Menstrual Symbolism". In *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*. Ed. T. C. T. Buckley - A. Gottlieb, 1–54. Berkeley, 1988.
6. Cicurel, Inbal - Sharaby, Rachel. "Women in the menstruation huts: variations in preserving purification customs among Ethiopian immigrants". *JFSR* 23/2 (2007): 69–84.
7. Cohen, Shaye J. D. "Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of 'Incorrect' Purification practices". In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law.* Ed. R. R. Wasserfall, 82–100. London, 1999.
8. Cook, Leslie A. "Body Language: Women's Rituals of Purification in the Bible and Mishnah". In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law.* Ed. R. R. Wasserfall, 40–59. London, 1999.
9. Douglas, Mary. *Leviticus as literature.* Oxford, 1999.

[64] See Cohen, "Purity", 89.

[65] From our personal experience we could cite the case from our small parish in the rural part of Lithuania. The old women, belonging to that parish, were able to identify the women from the other parishes because they were wearing their headsquares "not as in our parish".

10. -------. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* London, 1985.
11. Ellens, Deborah. "Menstrual Impurity and Innovation in Leviticus 15". In *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity.* Ed. K. De Troyer, 29–44. London, 2003.
12. Eller, Jack David. *Introducing Anthropology of Religion.* 2nd ed. New York, NY, 2014.
13. Gerstenberger, Edward S. *Leviticus: A Commentary.* OTL. Louisville, KY, 1996.
14. Gottlieb, Alma. "Menstrual Cosmology Among the Beng of Ivory Coast". In *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation.* Ed. T. C. T. Buckley - A. Gottlieb, 55–74. Berkeley, 1988.
15. Harrington, Hannah K. *The Purity Texts.* CQS. London, 2004.
16. Hartman, Tova - Marmon, Naomi. "Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions: Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Jewish Women". *GS* 18/3 (2004): 389–408.
17. Hieke, Thomas. *Levitikus 1–15.* HThKAT. Freiburg, 2014.
18. House, Paul R. *Lamentations.* WBC 23B. Nashville, 2004.
19. Jacobsen, Thorkild. *The Harps That Once... Sumerian Poetry in Translation.* New Haven, CT, 1987.
20. ------. "Mesopotamia. The Cosmos As a State". In *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East.* Ed. H. Frankfort, - H. A. Frankfort - T. Jacobsen et al., 125–184. OIE. London, 1977.
21. ------. "Notes on Selected Sayings". In *Sumerian Proverbs: Glimpses of Evereday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia.* Ed. E. I. Gordon, 447–487. Philadelphia, 1959.
22. Kaiser, Barbara Bakke. "Poet as 'Female Impersonator': The Image of Daughter Zion as Speaker in Biblical Poems of Suffering". *JR* 67/2 (1987): 164–182.
23. Lamoreaux, Jason T. *Ritual, Women, and Philippi: Reimagining the Early Philippian Community.* Eugene, OR, 2013.
24. Lawrence, Denise L. "Menstrual Politics. Women and Pigs in Rural Portugal", In *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation.* Ed. T. C. T. Buckley - A. Gottlieb, 117–136. Berkeley, 1988.
25. Levine, Baruch A. *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation.* JPSTC. Philadelphia, 1989.
26. Marsman, Hennie J. *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East.* OTS 49. Leiden, 2003.
27. Meacham, Tirzah. "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws". In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law.* Ed. R. R. Wasserfall: 23–39. London, 1999.
28. ------. "Female Purity (Niddah)". Online: jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/female-purity-niddah.
29. Milgrom, Jacob B. *Leviticus 1 16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary.* AB 3. New York, 1991.
30. ------. "Sin-offering or purification-offering?". *VT* 21/2 (1971): 237–239.
31. Milgrom, Jacob B. - Wright, David P. P. *"נדה, niddāh". TDOT* 9: 232–234.
32. Neusner, Jacob. "From Scripture to Mishnah: The Origins of Tractate Niddah". *JJS* 29/2 (1978): 135–148.
33. O'Grady, Kathleen. "The Semantics of Taboo: Menstrual Prohibitions in the Hebrew Bible". In *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity.* Ed. K. De Troyer, 1–28. London, 2003.
34. Philip, Tarja S. *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity.* StBL 88. New York, 2006.

35. Skultans, Vieda. "Menstrual Symbolism in South Wales". In *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation.* Ed. T. C. T. Buckley - A. Gottlieb, 137–160. Berkeley, 1988.
36. Smith, William Robertson. *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. First Series: The Fundamental Institutions.* 3rd ed. London, 1907.
37. Stol, Marten - Wiggermann, Franz A. M. *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting.* CM 14. Groningen, 2000.
38. Turner, Victor W. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual.* New York, NY, 1967.
39. Van der Toorn, Karel. *From Her Cradle to Her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman.* BS 23. Sheffield, 1994.
40. ------. Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia: *A Comparative Study. SSN 22. Assen,* 1985.
41. Weidner, Ernst Friedrich. "Hof- und Harems-Erlasse assyrischer Konige aus dem 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr." *AfO* 17/1 (1954): 257–293.

Gauta: 2020 02 10
Parengta: 2020 03 31

APSIVALYMO PO MENSTRUACIJŲ RITUALAI SENOVĖS IZRAELYJE: PRAKTIKA IR PATIRTIS

Santrauka

Religinis moters gyvenimas Biblijoje yra vaizduojamas tik epizodiškai. Todėl kelia susidomėjimą Senojo Testamento dėmesingas detalumas nusakant nuorodas dėl ritualų, skirtų moters apsivalymui po menstruacijų. Vis dėlto net ir šiuose tekstuose moterų religinių veiksmų interpretacija aprašoma iš vyriško pasaulėvaizdžio perspektyvos (pvz., netyrumo būklė, moterų nedalyvavimo liturgijoje nuorodos ir pan.). Ar įmanoma įvardyti, kaip šie ritualai buvo praktikuojami ir kaip tai patyrė senovės Izraelio moterys?

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: menstruacijos, feministinė Biblijos hermeneutika, ritualai, senovės Izraelis, hebrajų kalbos terminas *niddah*.

Algirdas AKELAITIS – kunigas, teologijos doktorantas, Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto Katalikų teologijos fakulteto dėstytojas. El. paštas: algirdas.akelaitis@vdu.lt.

Algirdas AKELAITIS – priest, PhD student of theology, lecturer at Vytautas Magnus University. E-mail: algirdas.akelaitis@vdu.lt.