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HONOUR AND SHAME AMONG GOD'S CHILDREN: NEGLECTED BIBLICAL INSIGHTS FOR AFRICAN CONTEXTS AND BEYOND

Abstract: *This study examines honour-shame dynamics in African Christianity by arguing that traditional African societies often share greater theological affinity with biblical passages than with Western Christian interpretations of them that have predominated in various African contexts. While African theology has frequently been characterized through a power-fear axis due to emphasis on features such as ancestral spirits and witchcraft, this paper demonstrates that honour-shame dynamics remain central to African social life, particularly affecting women's participation in church communities. The analysis proceeds in three parts. First, it explores how honour-shame operates within traditional African Religion (ATR), highlighting the ambivalent symbolism of blood and its disproportionate impact upon women. Second, through contextual, linguistic, and structural analysis of Leviticus 15, the paper reveals how biblical 'purity' laws functioned not to shame women but to honour them within communal life. Third, this study explores several practical implications of honour-shame dynamics operating within Africa today and suggests that non-Western Christian traditions with emphases on 'therapeutic' and restorative conceptions of salvation can help to redress the marginalization of women in African contexts while fostering models of communal flourishing. Ultimately, it is argued that this reassessment of honour-shame dynamics extends beyond Africa and holds transformative potential for the enrichment of increasingly complex Global Christianity as a whole.*

Keywords: *Honour–Shame Dynamics, African Christian Theology, Women in Christianity African Traditional Religion (ATR), Global Christianity, Täwaḥədo Christianity*

ČAST I SRAM MEĐU BOŽJOM DECOM: ZANEMARENI BIBLIJSKI UVIDI ZA AFRIČKE KONTEKSTE I ŠIRE

Sažetak: *Ova studija ispituje dinamiku časti i srama u afričkom hrišćanstvu, polazeći od tvrdnje da tradicionalna afrička društva često dele veću teološku srodnost sa biblijskim odlomcima nego sa zapadnim hrišćanskim tumačenjima tih tekstova, koja su preovlađivala u raznim afričkim kontekstima. Iako se afrička teologija često karakteriše kroz osu „moć–strah" zbog naglaska na elementima poput duhova predaka i vračanja, ovaj rad pokazuje da dinamika časti i srama ostaje središnja za afrički društveni život, posebno utičući na učešće žena u crkvenim zajednicama. Analiza se odvija u tri*

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dela. Prvo, istražuje se kako čast i sram funkcionišu unutar tradicionalne afričke religije (ATR), s naglaskom na dvosmislenoj simbolici krvi i njenom nesrazmernom uticaju na žene. Drugo, kroz kontekstualnu, jezičku i strukturalnu analizu Levitskog zakonika 15, rad otkriva da su biblijski zakoni o „čistoći" služili ne da posrame žene, već da ih počaste unutar zajedničkog života. Treće, studija razmatra nekoliko praktičnih implikacija dinamike časti i srama koje deluju u današnjoj Africi i sugeriše da nehrišćanske zapadne tradicije, sa naglaskom na „terapijskim" i restorativnim shvatanjima spasenja, mogu pomoći u ispravljanju marginalizacije žena u afričkim kontekstima, dok istovremeno podstiču modele zajedničkog blagostanja. U zaključku autor iznosi da ova ponovna procena dinamike časti i srama prevazilazi afrički kontekst i poseduje transformativni potencijal za obogaćenje sve složenijeg globalnog hrišćanstva u celini.

Ključne reči: *dinamika časti i srama, afrička hrišćanska teologija, žene u hrišćanstvu, tradicionalna afrička religija (ATR), globalno hrišćanstvo, Täwaḥədo hrišćanstvo.*

Introduction

It is commonly recognised that the modern discipline of indigenous African Christian Theology began in earnest in the 1960s with the work of John Mbiti. Despite only six decades of existence, modern African Christian Theology has made tremendous strides and continues to enrich Global Christianity with many creative and valuable contributions.[2] Unfortunately, much of Western Christianity remains reticent or even resistant to the wisdom coming from the most populous Christian continent.

Of course, countless critiques have now been levelled against Mbiti's original claims about the basic compatibility of African Traditional Religion (ATR) with Christianity, and the work of African theologians increasingly explores far broader implications. One important critique made in recent years is articulated in Emmanuel Katongole's *The Sacrifice of Africa.*[3] Therein, Katongole examines why Christianity has failed to deliver on promises made to the peoples and societies of Africa.[4] Being a 'political theology', Katongole problematizes the dominant 'old models' of Western assistance and strongly critiques the nation

2 Some important examples include Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2009); Tim Hartman, *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2022); Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2019).

3 Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

4 Speaking generally about the African continent is difficult and can be problematic. Consequently, many prefer to distinguish between different regions of Africa. One prominent example is Zac Niringiye, who speaks specifically about 'four Africas'; North Africa, the Horn of Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Africa. Although this author does not completely endorse such division, the arguments of this paper comport generally with all these categories to varying degrees. Zac Niringiye, "Keynote Address" (Africa Society of Evangelical Theology, St Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya, March 3, 2023).

state institution, but a deeper and more subtle dilemma is mostly neglected in the text: Are the problems he identifies characteristic of Christianity as a whole or are they mostly connected to particular forms of Christianity? Stated differently, have problems of compatibility between traditional African values been conflated with all of Christianity when in reality they are disproportionately connected with Western Christian traditions?

Katongole writes as a Roman Catholic priest and admits several troubling features of his own tradition and Protestantism in his book. What is not fully acknowledged, however, is the fact that both of these Christian traditions share a pronounced 'Western' heritage that differs in important ways from other major Christian traditions,[5] and which asks quite different questions from those being asked by the growing Christianity in the Majority World. Allen Yeh has recently outlined many of these characteristic errors, including an overemphasis on a 'soterian gospel', a tendency towards Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, and an excessive concern for propositional truth.[6]

It is well known that the majority of missionary efforts in Africa have come from either Protestantism or Catholicism. The particular doctrinal priorities of Western Christianity and the impression they made upon indigenous Africans are famously described in Chinua Achebe's classic *Things Fall Apart*.[7] Achebe paints in revealing light just how strange ideas like propositional truth and an empirical dismissal of spirits appear to African sensibilities. Our purpose here is not to consider doctrinal differences *per se* but rather to explore some underlying cultural dynamics in traditional African societies that are largely unfamiliar to Western Christianity, namely honour-shame and power-fear.[8] We hope that this assessment will simultaneously encourage African Christians about the potential legitimacy of many traditional convictions while also clarifying how bridges of understanding can be built between Western and Majority World systems of Christian thought.

The argument of this essay is multifaceted. First, we argue that many features of traditional African societies bear a stronger resemblance to the biblical texts than to Western Christianity, which has come to predominate in Africa. Second, we argue that because of such similarity, African Christian Theology would do

5 For those unfamiliar with the rich Christian traditions beyond the west, Jenkin's important text is a good starting point. Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia--and How It Died*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009).

6 For an excellent summary of these differences, see Allen Yeh, "Majority World Theologies," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 38, no. 3 (2021): 5–6.

7 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 1994).

8 Two important books of recent years that have shed important light on these factors are Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2008); E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012).

well to glean ideas from ancient non-Western traditions of Christianity, which could in turn enrich the theology that is increasingly representing Global Christianity.[9] Consequently, this study comprises three parts. The first section considers the dynamics of honour-shame within traditional African societies. The second section examines Leviticus 15 as a biblical case study of honour-shame. The third section explores some practical implications of honour-shame dynamics operating within Africa today.

Ultimately, faithfulness to the biblical texts and recognition of current dynamics in African Christianity mean that focusing attention on the honour-shame dynamics of women is a major lens for this study. Although much of Western Christianity continues to incorporate women in admirable ways, it is problematic to assume that such developments can achieve the same results in African contexts. By increasing understanding about the nuanced dynamics of biblical honour-shame, we aim to reveal practical ways that Christians can correct habits resulting from a Western theological gaze.

Part 1: Honour and Shame in the African Context

Traditional African Dynamics

Traditionally, African societies have been identified as operating primarily along the axis of power-fear.[10] This axis is one of three major cultural identifiers that have gained prominence in the last 70 years, the others being innocence-guilt and honour-shame. The formulation of these cultural types was popularised in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*,[11] which focused on the dynamics of shame and honour in Japan. Eight years later, Eugene Nida wrote his influential missional book, *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions*, which solidified these cultural categorisations in a new way.[12] Significantly, it correlated Africa with the power-fear axis.

The main reasons for identification of the power-fear axis in Sub-Saharan Africa have been connected to the post-mortem activity of ancestors ('living dead') and spirits, which is closely related to the prominence of various practices generalised

9 To quote Professor Andrew Walls, '… African Christianity must be seen as a component of contemporary representative Christianity, the standard Christianity of the present age, a demonstration model of its character. That is, we may need to look at Africa today, in order to understand Christianity itself.' Andrew F. Walls, "Introduction: African Christianity in the History of Religions," in *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, edited by Christopher Fyfe and Andrew Walls, 1-16 (Edinburgh: Centre for African Studies, 1996), 3.

10 The current practice of hyphenating these words is meant to indicate the fact that they can occur simultaneously and overlap. They are not opposing polarities in a zero-sum scenario.

11 Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Hougton Mifflin, 1946).

12 Eugene A. Nida, *Customs and Cultures* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954).

under the term 'witchcraft'.[13] Failure to take proper care of the deceased can result in spiritual torment from their spirits. Additionally, those people in traditional African cultures who are positioned to interact more closely with the spiritual realm ('*Babaláwo*', '*Vakanduba*', 'witchdoctor', etc.) unquestionably possess (or wield) unique *power* and invoke *fear* within many members of society (regardless of whether such fear is justified by Western, scientific standards[14]).

Notwithstanding such clear elements of the power-fear dynamic, there has been increased recognition about the importance of the honour-shame dynamic throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Notable authors in this conversation include John Iliffe, Andrew Mbuvi, and Kwame Bediako.[15] Ultimately, it is argued that the honour-shame and power-fear dynamics are *interrelated* and *interdependent* in African societies. In fact, Freeman and Calenberg go so far to say that African fear is often precisely the 'fear of shame'.[16] Despite this increasing recognition, discussion about the honour-shame continuum in African Christianity remains rather neglected. This neglect is serious because even though fear of witchcraft and spiritual attacks is fading due to increasing levels of education, modernisation, and Western influence across Africa, the impact of honour-shame dynamics in daily life remains strong.[17]

Although famous articulations of communal dynamics, such as *ubuntu,* have now come under criticism because of over-use, the fact that collective concerns typify African communities remains of paramount importance when considering honour-shame.[18] Most Western cultures typically prioritise innocence-guilt as the dominant marker of social status, but they also conceptualise these dynamics in mostly *individualistic* terms.[19] For this reason, it is crucial to highlight the fact that the honour-shame dynamics in Africa operate within highly relational

13 The term "witchcraft" is largely associated with the work of Evans-Pritchard. However, there has been increasing pushback against such scholarship, which Kankonde-BuKasa has described as the "Witchcraft Fetish". Peter KanKonde-BuKasa, "A Reflection on the Necessity for an 'Ontological Turn' in African Studies with Reference to the Ecologies of Knowledge Production," *Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity*, 2015, 20ff.

14 For a helpful discussion on suspicions and other dynamics, see Sónia Silva, "Political Evil: Witchcraft from the Perspective of the Bewitched," *Evil in Africa: Encounters with the Everyday.*, 2015, 29–42.

15 See S. E. Freeman and Richard D. Calenberg, "Understanding Honor-Shame Dynamics for Ministry in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 175, no. October-December (2018): 14.

16 Freeman and Calenberg, 429.

17 KanKonde-BuKasa, "A Reflection on the Necessity for an 'Ontological Turn' in African Studies with Reference to the Ecologies of Knowledge Production," 21ff.

18 Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, Kindle Locations 700-701 Katongole writes: "The current interest in ubuntu in South Africa is yet another other version of the same old search for values that legitimate nation-state politics from the African past."

19 For more on this subject, see E. Randolph Richards and Richard James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).

communal contexts. To reiterate, shame is not a modified version of Western, individualistic guilt; it is a profound acknowledgement that one's own standing within a community is inextricably connected with that community. Examples of shameful behaviour in traditional African societies may include everything from unsanctioned pregnancies to acquiring excessive wealth, but it is always measured in relation to its adverse impact upon the community as a whole.[20]

Because shameful actions are mainly determined to be those that adversely impact the community, they are often actions that are *manifested publicly*. This is why many traditional Africans tend to associate shame with 'getting caught' and why individuals are frequently reluctant to 'confess' any wrongdoing; making a shameful deed publicly known is what actualises 'shame' for the community.[21] Thus, we might say that the most blatant instances of shame in the context of ATR are those that are visibly evident to the community.

In this light, an interesting tension arises with a common source of shame: Blood. Blood has been described as an 'extremely important aspect'[22] of ATR that has played a 'primal role'[23] in the shaping of social and cultural roles. However, recent scholarship has noted the *multivalent* and even *ambivalent* nature of blood in ATR. In the Yorùbá culture, for instance, blood can be a 'a signifier of life, virginity, covenant, sacrifice, danger, identity and kinship.'[24] Even the important study from M. Y. Nabofa delineated the diverging functions or 'symbols' of blood within different African cultures.[25] This has prompted Machingura and Museka to speak of the 'blood paradox'.[26] Thus, blood can be associated with both honour *and* shame.

This important ambiguity is clarified when one considers private and public occurrences involving blood. Blood that is shed in private, for instance, is rarely associated with honour, but blood that is shed in public can sometimes be an important conveyor of honour. This notably occurs in various covenant rituals where two different parties make incisions on each other's arms in order to intermingle their blood in a symbolic demonstration of their unity, peace, or agreement. An additional example involves a revenge killing. A murder motivated by passion or recklessness is deeply shameful, probably because it represents a loss of control that is threatening to the safety and solidarity of the community.

20 Silva, "Political Evil," 35ff.
21 Freeman and Calenberg, "Understanding Honor-Shame Dynamics for Ministry in Sub-Saharan Africa," 432.
22 M.G. Mokgobi, "Understanding Traditional African Healing," *African Journal for Physical Health Education, Recreation, and Dance* 20, no. Suppl 2 (September 2014): 24–34.
23 Mercy Oduyoye, "Calling the Church to Account: African Women and Liberation," *The Ecumenical Review* 47, no. 4 (October 1995): 482.
24 Oluwabunmi Tope Bernard, "A Literary Interpretation of Blood Symbolism in Ifá Divination Poetry," *Yoruba Studies Review* 5, no. 1.2 (December 21, 2021): 35.
25 M. Y. Nabofa, "Blood Symbolism in African Religion," *Religious Studies* 21, no. 3 (1985): 389–405.
26 Francis Machingura and Godfrey Museka, "'Blood as the Seat of Life': The Blood Paradox among Afro-Christians," *Perichoresis* 14, no. 1 (June 1, 2016): 41–62.

In response to such murder, however, a revenge killing is allowed, prescribed by tribal customs, and even encouraged. This is why such actions were classically referred to as 'honour killings'. A revenge killing is not spontaneous, reckless, or passionate. Rather, it is designed in a specific manner to restore honour to all involved. Thus, the shedding of blood takes place in a public manner so that all parties (victims, perpetrators, and bystanders) can observe the way that honour has been restored.[27]

Most of these events are usually executed by men, but the situation in ATR vis-à-vis blood is somewhat different for women. Most notably, menses occurring in private have the potential to be shameful if somehow exposed or not managed correctly. Conversely, the virginal blood accompanying the consummation of a new marriage-although technically a 'private' affair between a husband and wife-is eventually reported as a public confirmation of a proper union and thus conveys great honour upon the couple, the extended families, and the entire community that has taken part in the nuptial festivities and ceremonies.[28]

Returning to the nature of blood itself, one should not be surprised to discover such parity between these events and the substance itself. Despite the problematic or potentially shameful nature of menses in general, there is also recognition in several traditional cultures that such blood carries unique and special power. In fact, Amoah writes that 'The blood of such women was considered potent enough to neutralise or defeat evil powers'.[29] At the core, blood represents the fundamental life force of whatever creature it belongs to. Thus, blood is paradoxical because when within a creature, it contributes to life, but when outside of a creature, it contributes to death.[30] According to Awolalu, this reality forms the operative mechanism of sacrifices. He writes that 'the life of the victim is in the blood… In offering the blood, the Yoruba know and believe that they are offering the life of the animal. And when they give the life of the animal, they want to have life in exchange.'[31] Such offering of life can be both celebratory and mournful; to use the words of Awolalu, 'sacrifice… has its positive as well as its negative side'.[32]

Many readers will recognise the similarities at this point to the sacrificial system described within the Hebrew Bible, and such recognition is hardly new.[33] Although the slaughter of animals is a normal feature in the Torah, the role of blood is sometimes disproportionately linked to the paradigm of innocence-guilt.

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27 See "Blood Revenge" in Nabofa, "Blood Symbolism in African Religion," 393.
28 Bernard, "A Literary Interpretation of Blood Symbolism in Ifá Divination Poetry," 35–36.
29 Elizabeth Amoah, "The Woman Who Decided to Break the Rules," in *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer Stone Books, 1987), 3.
30 Cf. Leviticus 17:11, 14.
31 J. Omosade Awolalu, "Yoruba Sacrificial Practice," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 5, no. 2 (1973): 90.
32 Awolalu, 82.
33 Amoah, "The Woman Who Decided to Break the Rules."

The offering of blood to God *per se* is never instructed for ordinary Israelites, and even the blood sprinkled by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement carries a distinct function: Rather than securing 'life' in some type of exchange or transaction, the sprinkling of blood on the Day of Atonement has a marked cleansing function.[34] This Israelite context will be discussed in more detail in *Part 2*. For now, we simply note the general similarity between ATR and Ancient Israel concerning the ubiquity of sacrifice and its ambiguous function in addressing social problems.

Although bodily emissions of men also factor into the considerations of shame within ATR, they are far less discussed than those of women. This reality is likely influenced by the frequency and duration of each respective type. The resulting situation, then, is that women in many traditional African societies find themselves in positions of shame (or at least potential shame) far more often than men. This feature seems to be universal, even within various tribes that are matriarchal in their structure and leadership.[35] Ultimately, we can observe a strong affinity between these dynamics and those found in ancient Israel. This leads us to our next section of *Part 1*, wherein we consider how these traditional views have been handled by Christianity and modernisation.

The Modern Situation

Despite the rapid growth and outward dominance of Christianity in Africa, ATR still holds on to Africans in deep and important ways, with rough estimates placing the number of ATR adherents around 100 million.[36] Indeed, various 'syncretistic' practices-which mix Christianity and traditional beliefs-are well known and well attested. Thus, if an African Christian feels that the Church is not meeting their needs in some particular way, the option of a traditional ritual is often relatively close at hand. Much of this tendency is closely connected with fear of spiritual malevolence and meddling-especially revolving around recent or imminent deaths. The syncretistic dynamics relating to shame, however, are less understood and less explored. One of the easiest ways to consider these dynamics is by looking at the situation of women in modern African societies.

Many African scholars have and continue to lament the ways that African women are mistreated and excluded from full participation in and contribution to African Christianity.[37] One prominent voice in this regard has been Mercy

34 See Leviticus 16:16, 19.

35 Another term used is 'matrilineal'. Consider the Akan of Ghana, the Senufo of the Ivory Coast, and the Serer of Senegal. Cf. Oduyoye, "Calling the Church to Account," 482.

36 It should be noted that such numbers do not necessarily consider ATR and Christianity to be mutually exclusive; in other words, one can be a professing Christian while also participating in ATR.

37 John S. Pobee and Bärbel von Wartenberg-Potter, eds., *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer Stone Books, 1987); Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (London, UK:

Oduyoye. Her criticism has highlighted flaws in Western theology and has also rebutted shortcomings of African Theology, including Mbiti's view on love and marriage.[38] Oduyoye considers the difficulty of Christian women in Africa, especially tragic in light of the vital role that African women occupy in traditional family and village life. For example, in contrast to the biblical narrative, Oduyoye notes that numerous African myths discount a primordial subordination of women.[39] In fact, some ATR myths claim that originally women could conceive and give birth by themselves, while others claim that it was male 'envy of the procreative power of women' that led to all of the problems in the world.[40]

The African woman (or *Obirin Meta*) has been upheld as a beacon of fortitude, determination, and love.[41] Indeed, the heroism of many African women has been lifted to international awareness as stories have been told about their maternal bravery in the midst of tragedies such as the Rwandan Genocide and the hellish exploits of Joseph Kony.[42] Why do African women continue to feel so marginalised from the Church when they have played such crucial roles in traditional African societies? The dynamics of shame-honour may be some of the main factors at the heart of this problem.

The most obvious difficulty is menstruation. Accessibility of proper hygiene products (which have drastically improved in recent decades) often requires girls to miss schooling to avoid the shame that comes from exposing their bleeding. Moreover, the economic and family responsibilities regularly fall to women in traditional societies, which additionally hampers their ability to receive the same education and opportunities as men. Famous issues such as female genital mutilation and sexual slavery are important, but should not obscure the more common and pernicious difficulties that African women face in everyday life.

In the particular cultural climate of Sub-Saharan Africa, the story of the bleeding woman in Mark 5/Luke 8 has been highly popular, and various interpretations can be instructive for our purposes here. While Western readings of this passage fairly emphasise the physical pain, isolation, frustration, and *financial*

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001); Isabella F. Ras, "Broken Bodies and Present Ghosts: Ubuntu and African Women's Theology," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (February 8, 2017).

38 Mercy Oduyoye, "A Critique of Mbiti's View on Love and Marriage in Africa," in *Religious Plurality in Africa*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 1993).

39 Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*.

40 Oduyoye, 111, 77.

41 Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 31. This phrase comes from the Yoruba language and means something like 'many-sided woman'.

42 Cf. Michèle Miller Sigg, "Honoring the Christian Lionesses of Africa: Documenting the Legacy of Women in the History of African Christianity," in *African Christianity in Local and Global Contexts: A Festschrift in Honour of Rev. Professor Isaac Deji Ayegboyin*, ed. Samson Adetunji Fatokun, vol. 7, Religious Studies (Ibadan, Nigeria: Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2019), 7.

ruin of the bleeding woman, an African reading is much more likely to draw attention to the *shame* specifically associated with the woman being childless. Indeed, this dimension is suggested by the biblical text itself since it emphasises the precious, only daughter of Jairus in the verse immediately preceding the passage (Luke 8:42). An African reading would, furthermore, emphasise the fundamental relational dimensions pervading all of African society.[43] This woman has not only lived within the shadow of shame as an individual but has also brought a measure of shame upon her entire extended family. Ultimately, however, Jesus restores her honour not merely by healing her physical condition but by calling her 'daughter' (Luke 8:48) and situating her once again within the social structure of a family.

In order to improve the situation of women within African Christianity, this type of understanding of both shame and the *honour that restores* is vital. The woman of Luke 8 is often discussed or used as a starting point for extrapolation, but the passage itself is quite short and the corresponding Levitical laws are seldom examined in detail. For this reason, the second part of this paper examines Leviticus 15 in detail. By doing so, we can note simply the aspects causing shame but also those bestowing honour. Key in our analysis is the strong relational dynamic, and especially the equal concern given to men and their corresponding bodily functions that cause shame. Readers would do well to bear in mind the tensions between guilt and shame that have already been highlighted. Are the sacrifices offered in Leviticus 15 required because of *guilt*? If so, the logical conclusion is that individuals with 'bodily flows' are somehow to blame. On the other hand, if bodily flows place the individuals in a position of ritual 'shame' rather than guilt, the situation is markedly different. Their need is not based upon *forgiveness for wrongdoing* but rather upon restoration of honour because of the common way that they have been influenced by shame.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the entire notion of sacrifice in African Christian Theology is coloured by Western and Protestant perspectives. Although much work has been conducted on the topic of sacrifice in Africa, it has not yet been fully acknowledged that the difficulties in categorising it are largely the result of Western notions. Such difficulty is famously exhibited in Awolalu's classic study of sacrifice in Yoruba culture.[44] He struggles to describe Yoruba sacrifice as either propitiatory or celebratory and who exactly the sacrifices are 'for'.[45] We suggest that much of this difficulty stems from the fact that a pronounced Western view of *sacrifice as addressing guilt* is taken for granted. A full discussion of this view is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, it will suffice to say that Western understanding of sacrifice is largely linked with guilt,

43 Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. Theology Brewed in an African Pot (p. 54). Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.
44 Awolalu, "Yoruba Sacrificial Practice."
45 Awolalu, 92.

which has caused it to emphasise the dynamic of 'atonement' and various juridical mechanics that accompany it.[46] Famously, the Eastern Orthodox traditions of Christianity have tended to downplay theories of atonement connected to guilt in favour of more 'therapeutic' notions of God's salvific work. These dynamics should be kept in mind and will be mentioned periodically in our next section for the ways they influence an understanding of shame and especially the honour afforded to women in society.

Part 2: Leviticus 15 – A Biblical Portrait of Honour and Shame

As already stated above, Leviticus 15 contains the fundamental Israelite laws governing the types of bodily emissions plaguing the woman in Luke 8. Although Western Christian readings of this passage (historical and modern) have often disproportionately drawn negative conclusions about the implications for women in particular,[47] the work of female theologians and other scholars in recent decades has given cause to recognise in the Torah a keen appreciation and even celebration of menstruant women.[48] Important caveats come from the likes of Dorothea Erbele-Küster, who argues that Leviticus 15 is an idealised text that does not reflect reality.[49] Others, especially the famous anthropologist Mary Douglas, claimed that the Levitical laws were primarily representative of deeper spiritual realities (i.e. the Temple) and that Leviticus functioned originally as a type of 'literary utopia'.[50] While acknowledging that Levitical laws can operate at a symbolic level, the following paragraphs argue that Leviticus 15 reflects much more basic elements of how women were to be honoured in ancient Israel. In order to consider such elements, this section will examine Leviticus 15 through three basic lenses: *contextual*, *linguistic*, and *structural*.

To begin, it is vital to observe the *communal context* in which we find this passage. Regardless of the various positions one may hold about the 'purity laws', Leviticus is not a collection of private, moralistic rules to be observed on a purely individual basis. Rather, these instructions were given for the benefit of the *entire Israelite community*, and therefore involved – at some level – the *participation*

46 It is often remarked that many key thinkers in Western Christianity were trained in the practice of law or rhetoric and therefore produce theology along those lines. Key examples are Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. Cf. "The Introspective Conscience of the West" in Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

47 Cf. Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus 12 and 15* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017), 4.

48 One very important volume is Judith A. Herbert, ed., *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

49 Erbele-Küster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus 12 and 15*; Cf. Yitzhaq Feder, "Review: Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus 12 and 15," *Review of Biblical Literature*, 2018.

50 Erbele-Küster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus 12 and 15*, 18–19.

of the entire community. In contrast to other religions of the time, which aimed at cultivating a coterie of pure priests or holy individuals, God demonstrates in Leviticus his desire to nurture a *holy people*, 'a holy nation, who collectively will be a royal priesthood, a rich treasure belonging to God.'[51] This collective thrust is readily apparent in Ch. 15, which begins: *'Speak to the Israelites and say to them…'* A clearer English rendering would be: '*Speak to ALL of the Israelites…* '[52] The ensuing message is not merely relevant for women, nor was it deemed only appropriate for adults – God wanted all of the Israelites to learn how to handle the common and daily realities of bodily fluids. Even if the agrarian society of the Israelites was less squeamish about topics than modern people, it is apparent that God himself views this topic as more important than any uncomfortable feelings the Israelites may have about it.

In order to situate Ch. 15, a simple understanding of the sweep of Leviticus is necessary. Most scholars agree that the Day of Atonement (Ch. 16) occupies the thematic and gravitational centre of the book. This day – occurring once each year – ostensibly served to purify the sanctuary and its furniture, but acted more deeply as an atonement 'on behalf of' all of Israel.[53] It is also likely that Ch. 16 functions as the climax of an older, 'P source'.[54] Regardless, Ch. 15 comes at a crucial juncture (either right before the 'original' climax or right next to the new, redacted 'centre' of the book).

A smaller division within purity laws, which is sometimes referred to as the 'Regulations on Clean and Unclean' (Chs. 11–15), also envelops Ch. 15. This title is not necessarily inaccurate, but it fails to convey the way that these chapters address an immense scope of daily activities and situations.[55] In short, it seems that these chapters are located immediately before the climactic Day of Atonement because of their practical relevance for daily occurrences (eating food, dealing with sickness, sexual health). One fascinating feature which may contribute to the emphasis placed upon Chs. 11–15 has to do with the roles of Moses and

51 *NIB*, 997. Cf. Exodus 19:5–6.

52 Literally, the passage says, 'speak to the *sons of Israel*' (דַּבְּרוּ אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). Those who see this as a misogynistic indicator overlook the fact that a mixed gender group is addressed in Hebrew by use of the masculine collective pronoun. The phrase used here is identical to the phrase used throughout the Torah to address God's children. Thus, there is no reason to read a different meaning into this chapter, even though it happens to talk about distinctly gendered issues.

53 16:11, 17, 24.

54 One major theory contends that Leviticus is comprised of two main sources: the Priestly Code (P), which consists of chapters 1–16, and the Holiness Code (H), which roughly corresponds to the last ten chapters. Full acceptance of this theory is not necessary for the basic arguments presented here.

55 Jonathan Burnside has offered a fascinating argument for how the many apparently arbitrary divisions actually act as dynamic paradigms which would have had a comprehensive reach for the practical purpose of the Israelite community. See Jonathan Burnside, "At Wisdom's Table: How Narrative Shapes the Biblical Food Laws and Their Social Function," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 2 (2016): 223–45.

Aaron. In most of Leviticus, each brother has a separate and distinct part to play, but it seems that the 'Regulations on Clean and Unclean' – perhaps because of the scope of topics addressed – require *both* brothers acting in conjunction. Thus, we find at the beginning of Ch. 15 God speaking to *both* Moses and Aaron. This only happens four times in the entire book, and all four occurrences are clustered in Ch. 11–15.[56] Regardless, it seems that wide-ranging concerns addressed in these critical chapters can only be navigated sufficiently with the oversight of *all* leadership available.

The last contextual feature for us to note relates to the theme of 'holiness'. Forms of the word קדֹשׁ 'holy' occur some 150 times in Leviticus, often in connection to the idea of 'holiness unto the Lord'. Two of the most significant verses relating to this theme of holiness in the P source act as bookends to Chs. 11–15: 10:10 and 15:31.[57] In 10:10–11, the central task of Aaron (and therefore the priests) is described: *'You are to distinguish between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses.'* After a brief narrative break, this task then begins in earnest with Ch. 11:1: '*And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying…'* Then, at the end of Ch. 15 comes the crucial reminder, acting both as a summary of the preceding chapters and a preparation for the climactic Day of Atonement: *'Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.'* The reason it was so important for Israel to learn how to distinguish between the clean and the unclean was because it mirrored its vocation to be a 'blessing to the nations'. The call to holiness simultaneously involved being *among the nations* and *distinct from them*.[58] In short, the instructions of Leviticus 15 help in some way to train and 'prepare Israel for its world mission'.[59]

Moving on to the *linguistic lens*, several insights can be gleaned from Leviticus 15. One of the most foundational factors contributing to negative historical views of menstruation is one of translation. As with other insances of biblical interpretation, past translations of specific terminology have caused particular views about this subject to be implicitly perpetuated through the centuries. In the case of Leviticus 15, the Hebrew term for menstruation, נִדָּה, has mostly been translated unfavourably, including: 'impurity', 'immorality', 'abomination',

56 Lev. 11:1; 13:1; 14:33; 15:1. Whilst acknowledging the risk of 'over spiritualizing' the tasks of each brother, it may be a helpful simplification to describe Aaron's cultic remit ('priest') as representing the more technical, hands-on areas of responsibility whilst Moses' intercessory responsibilities ('prophet') correspond more closely to the 'big picture' vision of leadership.

57 There is also an important 'passing comment' in 11:44–45.

58 Gen. 12:2–3; Deut. 4.

59 Leander Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 988.

'abhorrent thing', 'filth', 'excretion', 'something to be shunned', etc.[60] Such interpretations were largely influenced by Greek and Roman views of menstruation (from thinkers like Aristotle and Pliny), which were then adopted by Church fathers such as Jerome and Augustine.[61] Centuries later, Aquinas maintained these views, and John Calvin notably referred to menstruation as a 'shameful thing'.[62]

Such translations overlook an important perspective found within Talmudic and Midrashic literature, which defines נִדָּה literally as 'separation' when applied to the period of menstruation and 'one set aside' when applied to the menstruant herself.[63] This translation is much more aligned to the passage of Leviticus 15, which gives no suggestions of negative connotation, simply describing the menstruant as 'unclean'.[64] Furthermore, when 'uncleanliness' is discussed at the end of Ch. 15, it is in reference to *all* of Israel (v. 31). This leads Kathleen O'Grady to claim that the concept of separation is 'doubly invoked' in the passage: *'Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness.'*[65] Ultimately, these factors suggest an improved translation of Leviticus 15:19b: *'... She shall be in her time of separation for seven days.'*[66]

Another linguistic element both solidifies this translation and helps explain it. This is the use of an unusual form of the verb נזר (הִזַּרְתֶּם) found in 15:31, which is found in only one other passage of Scripture – Numbers 6.[67] There, it is used to describe the characteristic separation of Nazirites (נָזִיר). They are to separate themselves from wine, strong drink, and contact with the dead.[68] Consequently, it should be no surprise to learn that נִדָּה and נָזִיר come from the same verbal roots.[69] The connection between נִדָּה and נָזִיר is also demonstrated by the fact that

60 Interestingly, the KJV is one of the few translations to preserve the more accurate sense of *separation* (along with the Douay-Rheims Bible and Young's Literal Translation). See 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. Kristin De Troyer et al., Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 15; see especially note 46.

61 O'Grady, 11.

62 Calvin, *Four Last Books of Moses*, 2:33.

63 O'Grady, 'The Semantics of Taboo,' 16; cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York ; London: New York ; London : Doubleday, c1991., 1991), 745.O'Grady, 'The Semantics of Taboo,' 16; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York ; London: New York ; London : Doubleday, c1991., 1991), 745.

64 It is crucial not to oversimplify or flatten the complexity of the term *niddah*, for its semantic range certainly does include *both* 'uncleanliness' *and* 'separation' (in addition to others, such as 'ceremonial impurity'). For examples of 'uncleanliness' in clearer contexts see 2 Chron. 29:5 and Zech. 13:1. For examples of 'separation' in clearer contexts see Lev. 12:2 and Ezek. 22:10.

65 O'Grady, 'The Semantics of Taboo,' 17.

66 שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּהְיֶה בְנִדָּתָהּ. Author's translation. Note also that Erbele-Küster prefers the translation of "destabilized". See Erbele-Küster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus 12 and 15*, 127–30.

67 O'Grady, 17.

68 Num. 6:1–12.

69 Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 218.

both require the exact same sacrificial requirements for an 'aberration of status',[70] namely a seven day 'clean' period and two turtledoves or pigeons.[71] Only the נִדָּה and the נָזִיר are given this exact prescription.[72] One final similarity between these two special statuses is that contact between them (a נִדָּה coming into contact with a נָזִיר or vice versa) does not negate their special status as usual, presumably because they both occupy 'a similar structural space'.[73]

Here, it is necessary to comment briefly on the concept of holiness as being 'separate' or 'set apart' – arguably the dominant theme of the book of Leviticus. Crucially, being 'holy' and being 'separate' are *not* synonymous. Whilst holy things are always separate, separate things are not always holy. Therefore, although separateness is an important characteristic of holiness, it hardly exhausts what it means to be holy. Ultimately, it is best to rid ourselves of simplistic binary systems when considering holiness. On this point, O'Grady is instructive:

> Menstrual taboos, as are the proscriptions surrounding the nazir, are defined not by moral distinctions (negative-positive; pure-impure), but by the logic of separation inherent in both. Laws of morality and the logic of separation are not commensurate but competing systemic patterns of organisation.[74]

We have already noted how such a non-binary understanding of holiness may relate to the ambiguous understandings of shame in ATR. It is also beneficial to consider such a non-binary view in relation to God himself. For instance, God is not holy merely because God occupies the opposite extreme polarity of morality from us. Rather, God occupies an entirely different plane of 'morality', which can only be determined in relation to Godself. Additionally, God's holiness exceeds rather than conforms to our paradigms of goodness, morality, and purity. The consistent actions of the same holy God can confront humans in different ways depending on our status and/or position. One significant example which would have surely informed the perceptions of the audience in Leviticus 15 was the holiness of Mt. Sinai encountered in Exodus: *'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.'*[75] An example even more proximate to Leviticus 15 is found only a few pages earlier in Ch. 10, when Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu both perish because

70 Irregularity in cycle and contact with a corpse, respectively.
71 Lev. 15:30; Num. 6:9–10.
72 O'Grady, 'The Semantics of Taboo,' 20-21. English translations make it difficult to discern the distinction from Lev. 15:14–15. Only the menstruant and the nazirite must wait seven 'clean days'.
73 O'Grady, 21. It is also worth noting that because females could be nazirites, their menstruations did not violate their vows.
74 O'Grady, 22.
75 Exodus 19:12.

they offer 'unauthorised' fire to the Lord.[76] Along these lines, some have used the term 'dangerously holy' to describe the nature of those things set apart for God.[77] We will consider some implications of such 'dangerous holiness' for menstruation in the conclusion, but remind readers of the fact that menstrual blood was able to 'defeat evil powers' in multiple instances of ATR.[78]

Finally, we must observe the amazing *structural* balance of Leviticus 15. Many scholars have observed that this chapter exhibits a chiastic pattern (ABBA or ABCBA[79]), which serves as a 'beautiful example of symmetry and balance'[80] while also demonstrating 'meticulous deliberation'.[81] The fact that the same word (זוּב) is used to describe both the 'flows' of men and women further emphasises the striking parity of this passage.

This balance is constituted by a mirrored and logical progression from rare to frequent. Working from the outer edges inward, the first layer of the chiasm (A) discusses the *irregular* flows of men and women.[82] The next layer (B) discusses the *regular* flows of men and women.[83] Finally, the central layer (C) discusses the most frequent act of sexual intercourse itself.[84] This innermost layer (C) acts as a 'hinge' because it involves both sexes in the act of copulation and requires both to bathe with water and wait until evening in order to be clean (a modest stipulation considering contemporary expectations and other ritual requirements in this passage).

Although it is common for scholars to observe this chiastic structure,[85] many fail to articulate clearly the logical conclusions, namely that sexual intercourse is the 'central' concern of Leviticus 15. Of course, the sex act is hardly the *only* concern of the chapter, nor is it the one that elicits the most discussion. Rather, it occupies the middle 'hinge' which both informs and is informed by the surrounding material.[86] The fact that intercourse is the most common and mutually understood phenomenon for both sexes means that it needs the least explanation. Thus, it seems that this passage brilliantly combines an essential teaching on intercourse

76 Leviticus 10:1–3.
77 Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 148.
78 Amoah, "The Woman Who Decided to Break the Rules," 3.
79 Milgrom argues for an 'inverted hinge', while Ellens argues for a slightly more complex model which she calls an 'inverted hanging hinge.' Both scholars make important observations, and for the purposes of this brief paper the reality of a basic chiasm remains virtually unchanged.
80 Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1:1104; Cf. Sooman Noah Lee, "Characteristics of the Discharge in Leviticus 15," *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 17 (October 2005): 87.
81 Deborah Ellens, 'Menstrual Impurity and Innovation in Leviticus 15,' in *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity*, ed. Kristin De Troyer et al., Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 43.
82 Vv. 2b–15 and 25–30 respectively.
83 VV. 16–18 and 19–24 respectively.
84 V. 18.
85 For a helpful overview, see Lee, "Characteristics of the Discharge in Leviticus 15."
86 The work of Kenneth E. Bailey (among others) on rhetorical forms would seem to confirm this.

(nowhere else featured in the 'P source') with more difficult instructions in a way that tactfully and practically balances each. Returning to the above discussion about the contextual weight of Chs. 11–15, this seems entirely appropriate. After all, what other act could possibly encapsulate the life of a community preparing for holiness than one that is the most intimate and also literally sustains the life of the community? Indeed, in keeping with God's desire for a *holy people*, Leviticus 15 demonstrates that 'Even in this most intimate area, holiness of life demands control and regard for the sanctity of life (and not ascetic abstinence).'[87] And of course, the sex act is of utmost importance throughout the TNK as a symbol for faithfulness to God Himself.[88] Connecting this to our discussion in Part 1, we remind readers that blood is seen as the vital life force of every creature. When outside of the body, blood can become a symbol of death; this also seems to be true of male semen.

In this vein, the honour-shame implications for menstruation specifically are profound. Its importance (which is at least equal to the nocturnal emissions of men) is second only to sexual intercourse as something to be considered in this pivotal chapter of a people learning how to prepare themselves to live in relationship with a holy God. Ultimately, the message of this chapter 'amounts to nothing less than an astonishing innovation'.[89] Jacob Milgrom helps us grasp this fact:

> Against the backdrop of Israel's immediate and remote contemporaries and what was probably the dominant practice within Israel itself…, the Priestly legislation on the menstruant is all the more remarkable. First and foremost, she is neither banished from the community nor even isolated within her home. The implicit assumption of the pericope on the menstruant is that she lives at home, communicating with her family and performing her household chores.[90]

Far from being an obscure topic or uncomfortable thing, menstruation was apparently a familiar and legitimate concern of the entire Israelite community. Bernard Bamberger even goes so far as to contend that Ch. 15 serves 'to protect women from the importunities of their husbands at a time when they are physically and emotionally not ready for coitus'.[91] More detailed implications for what this might mean today will be considered in the sections below. Within the honour-shame context of ATR, it is not difficult to perceive how such practices would preserve and even increase the honour of a woman, her family, and the entire community. Although similar practices are observed in many traditional African

87 *NIB,* 997.
88 Cf. the narrative of Hosea.
89 Ellens, "Menstrual Impurity and Innovation in Leviticus 15," 43.
90 Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 952–53.
91 *NIB, 1105.*

societies, the tendency of men to acquire another wife or mistress subverts the delicate balance outlined in Leviticus by prioritising the sexual needs of men above the honour of women in her 'separateness'.

Part 3: Practical Implications of Leviticus 15 Relating to Honour and Shame

Based upon our analysis, it should be clear that 'bodily flows' were important concerns for the Israelite community not only in a pragmatic, biological, and anthropological sense, but also in a deeply social, spiritual, and religious sense as well. In particular, menstruation seems to have been especially important. It is difficult to avoid the fact that these laws were designed to protect, honour, and cherish the women of the Israelite community. In so doing, the entire Israelite community participated in the promotion of honour, which is most likely why God instructed both Aaron and Moses to communicate such vital instructions in a manifestly *public* manner. Although discussion about the relation between holiness and honour is a subject for a different paper, we can cautiously suggest that their similarity is enough to merit comparison in and by the text itself.

Crucially, neither blame nor guilt is ever placed on men or women simply because of their bodily emissions, but only if they contravene the instructions for managing them. Accordingly, the stipulated sacrifices outlined in Leviticus do not function as means of forgiveness but rather as means of restoration from a place of ritual 'shamefulness' to a proper and honourable status within the community. The period of 'separation' is not *ipso facto* shameful, but can result in either honour or shame depending on how it is handled by individuals and other members of the community. From these observations, several relevant remarks can be made.

In an apparent effort to remedy older (misogynistic) commentaries, some newer commentaries are beginning to argue for a *celebration* of the menstruant woman in Leviticus 15. Although this author does not consider such an interpretation necessary for the Israelite context, it is certainly worthwhile to consider how the radically counter-cultural instructions of Leviticus 15 may be applied today. Based upon our discussion in Part 1, it may be that a fitting application would involve a trusting Christian community honouring menstruating woman in creative ways that somehow highlight their unique and irreplaceable contribution to the missional task of nurturing family life, social cohesion, and children; or the 'disciples who make disciples'.[92] And because the dynamics of honour impact the entire community, such practices would likely increase the health of the entire church community.

92 This needn't necessarily be a *public* practice. Just as prominent church leaders, such as John Wesley, have recognized the need for open discussion of private matters in safe spaces (known as 'bands'), so also must we recognize the importance of proclaiming truth in nuanced manners.

Another effort to rectify misogynistic readings of Leviticus 15 has been developed by certain feminists who wish to expose various 'patriarchal' biases throughout the Torah. Although some of these points should be conceded, the overall project runs the risk of reconstructing an 'idealised' community that has never existed.[93] Therefore, it seems sufficient (at least for Leviticus) to recognise the profound implications existing even beneath the so-called 'patriarchal dominance' of the Torah, which makes it all the more powerful.[94] For African contexts especially, this may entail restoring women to vital roles in church governance and leadership without causing an opposite error of *shaming men* in the process.

Finally, it is worth returning to the complex concept of 'dangerous holiness' by consulting the larger narrative of which Leviticus is a part. Narratively speaking, Israel had only recently been rescued from slavery in Egypt. Accordingly, they recognised God as the one who had the potential to give them life. But as Israel prepared for their transition into the Promised Land, two things were consistently made clear: 1) this new, flourishing life could only be received (not earned or possessed); 2) this new life was contingent upon obedience. If Israel did not stay within the guidelines God had given them at Sinai, death would be their eventual end. Perhaps no other principle illustrates this tension better than the Land which was soon to be given to the Israelites. God made it very clear that both the Land and whatever it produced were *blessings given* rather than *rewards earned*.[95] Israel was never to become dependent on the Land instead of God.

Just as every Israelite would have recognised the real potential for God to bestow life *and* death, so also, they would likely have seen the menstruating women as one with the potential to produce and *symbolise* both life and death. To use Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator's excellent description of a symbol: 'A symbol points the way and allows us the possibility of expanding our horizon of thought; it does not pretend to contain everything that it attempts to represent.'[96]

Whereas life would have obviously come through the birth of new babies, death could have manifested in at least three ways. First, due to higher infant mortality rates, death could have been associated with failed births and also with the potential for the mother to die during childbirth. Second, the risk of communicable diseases through contact with blood was a real possibility. Most common, however, was the monthly reminder of death symbolised in menstruation itself.

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93 Again, this is one of the main claims of the important recent book by Dorothea Erbele-Küster, who claims that such prescriptions were never fully practiced. Erbele-Küster, *Body, Gender and Purity in Leviticus 12 and 15*.

94 Several other factors can be noted which support this reading, such as the unequivocal description in 15:18 that it is the *man*, not the woman, who causes the need for washing after normal sexual intercourse because of his semen.

95 Deuteronomy 6:11; Cf. Leviticus 25:23.

96 Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 28.

Leviticus 17 tells us twice that 'the life of a creature is in the blood'.[97] Consequently, it was understood that 'Blood outside the body is equivalent to death' whereas 'blood in all creatures makes possible life.'[98] Once again, this ambiguity reminds us that the menstruating woman occupies a pivotal role in traditional societies. In ancient Israel, as in Sub-Saharan Africa, prioritising and preserving the honour of women was a matter of great importance for the honour, health, and prosperity of the *entire community*.

The potential for a woman to eventually bring forth life or death pivoted on God's favour. Fertility was not a matter of skill or effort. This is made clear in various passages which mention God 'closing up wombs' because of idolatry and disobedience.[99] In a culture where large families were the norm and many children were expected,[100] fertility was a much more constant concern, and each month's menstruation was more likely to be viewed as some type of failure. The backdrop of Egypt – where Israelite babies were slaughtered to prevent the people from flourishing – contrasted sharply with the newfound freedom and possibilities for growth in the desert. But everything depended upon God. Just as God prohibited any Israelite dependency upon the Land as a form of security and provision which could replace him, so it also seems that God wanted the Israelites to remember that they could not perpetuate themselves through procreation apart from the will of God. As with other parts of God's law, where instructions fulfilled a basic practical need while simultaneously communicating deeper and more important truths about Himself, it is not difficult to see how the status of the 'dangerously holy' menstruant pointed in a small way to the status of the 'dangerously holy' God.[101] Ultimately, students of the Bible should seek to grasp the complex nature of the menstruant as one that is simultaneously weak, vulnerable, separate, ritually unclean, *and* powerful, dangerous, and holy.

The implications of this final consideration for African societies are readily apparent. The physiological realities of women are not accidents, mistakes, or necessarily shameful occurrences. Rather, such realities (as with those of men) are occurrences that simultaneously symbolise human vulnerability and procreative potential. If such realities are recognised as occurrences that need to be honoured in appropriate ways (rather than vilified or feared), a great deal of shame can be avoided for all members of the community. The remit of this study does not allow for a detailed discussion about *how* exactly women can be fully integrated in the life of local churches, but we can once again point briefly to the current example

97 Vv. 11 and 14.
98 *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 1*, 988.
99 Isaiah 66:9; Hosea 9:16.
100 Cf. Genesis 30:20.
101 Consider the layout of the tabernacle and temple, which involves multiple spaces for different levels of engagement with God's presence in the Holy of Holies.

of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwaḥədo* Church (EOTC) as a thriving non-Western church that is deeply African.

Although women are not allowed to serve as priests in the EOTC, they occupy a vital role in the life of the church, perhaps most notably in their capacity as nuns.[102] Indeed, women have long occupied a position of surprising parity in the EOTC, which may be largely traced to their unique way of venerating Mary. As opposed to the Roman Catholic Church, the EOTC (along with other Orthodox Churches) does not possess a rigid dogma of Mariology. Indeed, its position is strikingly similar to much of the traditional African understanding about mothers in general. Women and mothers are complex and mysterious in the best way possible.[103] Orobator's inspiring description is intended to point us towards the mystery of the Holy Trinity:

> Theologically… it would not be out of place to think of God using the symbol of *Obirin meta*. What would this kind of God look like? Not a majestic high God enrobed in terrifying inapproachable light. Rather, *Obirin meta* allows us to form the idea and open up to the experience of a God who combines many sides, many personalities, many realities, many relationships, and many qualities *at the same time and as the one and the same God*. Another way of putting it is to say that *Obirin meta* symbolizes the abundant and radical open-endedness of God in God's self and in our encounter of God. The veil of mystery is lifted, and we are able to recognize the God who enters into our experiences and meets us where we are.[104]

Such women simultaneously remind communities of their own vulnerability (through their regular menses) while also demonstrating the miraculous potential for communal growth and prosperity through human procreation. In the EOTC, Mary is also seen as deeply complex and mysterious.[105] In many ways, her veneration is justified precisely because she represents the aspects of humanity that are known but *exceed* the boundaries of articulation. Thus, Mary is simultaneously compared to Noah's Ark, the burning bush, the Ark of the Covenant, the chariot

102 For a recent, accessible treatment of one of the most famous Ethiopian female ascetics see Galawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*, ed. Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner, Annotated edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); See also Marta Camilla Wright, "At the Limits of Sexuality: The Femininity of Ethiopian Orthodox Nuns," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2002): 27–42.

103 See Orobator's discussion of the *Obirin Meta* or 'many-sided' woman. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 31.

104 Orobator, 32–33.

105 For an amazing example of Ethiopian writing on this subject, see the extended acrostic called John A. McGuckin, trans., *Harp of Glory: Enzira Sebhat*, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011).

which *bore* the Ark, Mount Zion, and several other things – often all in the space of quite short passages! Clearly, fresh theological perspectives on women cannot be smuggled into African churches without adjusting overall doctrinal systems and cultural assumptions, but our conviction is that the EOTC (and the other 'non-Western' churches with which it bears affinity) may represent fertile sources for how African Christians can wrestle with cultural dynamics of shame and how such dynamics can be leveraged to honour women for the benefit of the entire community.

Conclusion

Even if Leviticus 15 is somewhat idealised, as Erbele-Küster and others claim, it nevertheless outlines important standards and boundaries for how God's people can preserve and promote honour among themselves – especially in connection to those who are most likely to find themselves in positions of shame (i.e. women). Returning to the goals stated at the outset, our case study of biblical honour-shame matters for two main reasons: 1) Cultural values from the West continue to complicate and obstruct the development of Majority World Christianity, even though the Majority World shares greater affinity with the biblical texts; 2) Much of Western Christianity has reached an impasse and needs to be refreshed by the theological contributions of the Majority World, especially in relation to the dynamics of honour-shame.

To reiterate, the concepts of honour-shame within ATR are more closely aligned with those of the Hebrew Bible than with those of Western society. Blood is simultaneously sacred and impure, life-giving and death-bringing. The ambiguous concept of being 'dangerously holy' sheds considerable light on the historical situation of women in Ancient Israel and ATR. We have seen the strong relational and communal dynamics at play. In Leviticus 15, shame is a communal concern that involves *everyone*. This suggests an important conclusion about the honour-shame dynamic within ATR: context is king. An act that may cause enormous shame in one context could potentially bring great honour in another. This is precisely the case concerning the unjustified taking of life resulting in bloodshed (shame) versus an obligatory revenge-killing that also results in bloodshed (and great honour). Westerners approaching the honour-shame axis from a background in the guilt-innocence axis are accustomed to rigid ethical codes that establish absolute morals. Thus, they may be tempted to infer that shame and honour always result from specific actions[106] such as murder or menses. It is only when considering common factors (such as blood) within the communal African context that a proper understanding of honour-shame within traditional African thinking can be deduced.

106 This has been one of the main critiques of Jacob Milgrom's famous work on Leviticus.

We have suggested that African Christian Theology would do well to consider how the honour-shame dynamic functions in Majority World churches and how that might inform the integration of African women in churches. The Eastern Orthodox traditions seem to be particularly relevant, especially insofar as so-called 'therapeutic' conceptions of salvation can shift the focus from guilt towards one of restoring health, wholeness, and honour in societal contexts. While some minor changes – such as the ordination of women – may be appropriate and helpful methods of restoring honour within some denominations in Africa, they are not likely to be a solution for the larger issues facing the complex and multifaceted African Church. We contend that the best course forward is for African Christian Theology to draw upon traditional beliefs in conversation with the biblical texts and ancient non-Western Christian traditions (i.e. the EOTC) in order to create robust solutions for particular cultural problems that the Western Church has never faced and is therefore not well-equipped to handle.

Finally, it must be emphasised that the Christian obligation of preserving and promoting honour does not require full logical understanding. In fact, it may require precisely an awareness of our incomplete understanding, which must always reach towards fullness.[107] Just as children are instructed to honour their father and mother long before they know everything about them, perhaps Christians should practice showing honour as a pre-requisite component of Christian fellowship rather than as a reward for competence, achievement, or status. Due to human inclination towards sin, such behaviour is difficult within any culture, but is especially counter-cultural in many honour-shame cultures of today, where honour is given because of status. Perhaps, as African Christians continue to wrestle with these dynamics, they will rediscover just how revolutionary many of the actions of Jesus and the early Christians truly were.

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