

The Naked Bible Podcast 2.0

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“Leviticus 12-14”

Dr. Michael S. Heiser

With

**Residential Layman
Trey Stricklin**

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Leviticus 12-14

This episode covers Leviticus 12-14, chapters that speak to the ritual impurity of women after childbirth and skin diseases (commonly referred to as leprosy). The episode discusses the theological and worldview rationale for the laws about ritual procedure to restore individuals falling into these categories to ritual purity.

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 75, Leviticus 12-14. I'm your layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing this week?

MSH: Very good. We have three chapters to cover. It's a lot of material, a lot of strange stuff but I think there's some things in here that people will find interesting. Let's jump here into Leviticus 12. Of course, we'll take these things in order but all of these chapters are sort of related. We're going to get into essentially physical issues, things that happen to a person's body, I guess we'll try to make it as broad as we possibly can here, that result in ritual impurity. I'll say at the outset that none of these things have anything to do with sin, even though the purification solutions are going to bring up things like the "sin offering" and the "guilt offering". We've tracked through the offering system already and made a point to emphasize that a lot of that sort of thing is not about committing some moral act of impurity or some sin but it's something that makes you unfit for sacred space.

We're going to get more of that today. So when we talk about some of the offerings, I'll be referring back to the terminology that I encourage us to think about it. Sin offering is really a decontamination offering or a purification offering. The guilt offering, that's really a reparation offering, even though in the context we'll talk about in this case, there's no repertory sense to when it's used in regard to the skin diseases and all that sort of thing. But it's easy to look through an English translation and read these passages and think, does God look at a woman having a child? Is there some sort of moral impurity or sin with her?

And you might think that's silly but when you go to the New Testament and it talks about Mary bringing an offering after the birth of Jesus, I know many Protestants try to take a jab at Catholics. I certainly don't believe in the sinlessness of Mary. She's like any other human being, but they'll say look, Mary had to bring an offering. This is an atonement offering in the Old Testament, so of course, she was sinful. It just misses the point totally. So it's not as odd or far-fetched as we might think because you will hear stuff like that and read stuff like that, but it's just taken out of context. Anyway, let's just jump in here to chapter 12. I'll read the whole chapter. It's just a few verses long.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. ³ And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. ⁴ Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. ⁵ But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation. And she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days. [**MSH: Notice these things are connected to menstruation, which is a loss of blood. We'll return to that in a moment.**]

⁶“And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, ⁷ and he shall offer it before the LORD and make

atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood.
This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female.

MSH: Notice that even though there's this disparate number of days between bearing a son and bearing a daughter to be in this state of being ritually unclean, the solution for both is the same, exactly the same. So that should give us a little clue that the unevenness and the days have nothing to do with the more sinfulness of one child over the other, or that there's somehow some inferiority going on or a worstness going on with the female child as opposed to the male child, because the solution is exactly the same. Well get back to the disparity of days in a moment as well.

“This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female. ⁸ And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.”

MSH: She'll actually be made pure. She'll be made fit for sacred space again. She hasn't sinned. That's the whole chapter right there. There's no talk about an offense, a moral offense against God or anything like this. We should be used to the dichotomy in that trajectory by now having gone through the sacrificial language. So, when you go through chapter 12, the natural questions are what's the logic here? Why do we have this law? What's the rationale? There's no association with sin or divine displeasure. Children obviously are considered a blessing throughout the Old Testament. Childbearing is always considered in high regard. You have passages like Psalm 128:3 that establish that; Genesis 24:60, a bunch of verses you can go to for the goodness of having children. So why would Leviticus 12 then deem the postpartum woman to be unclean and why the different number of days for uncleanness, the total time unclean for a female child versus a male child? What's going on here?

There are a couple of approaches. I'll just hit a couple of things and sort of give you my take on all of this. When we get to chapter 15, I'll be referring back this and some other chapters as well because you can put this chapter and some of the material in other chapters under this whole, really an umbrella question, why do various we'll just call them bodily discharges make someone ritually unclean? Now here in this case, you're having a child and you bleed. In other words, the connection between of the birth, the childbirth is in the passage connected with her menstruation. Israelite women were considered ritually unclean, ritually impure when they were having their period, and chapter 12 here connects that situation with this one. So the issue is bodily discharge not in terms of the child, that's not what the discharge is we're talking about, but the loss of what we might call life fluids, blood in this case. There's lots of blood that come out in childbirth.

There's water. I'm going to refer to the prescientific nature of the context here because personally I think that has something to do with the disparate nature of the impurity periods. But for lack of a better term, water and blood come out and all this kind of stuff, liquids associated with the childbirth. So to the Israelite, this is a loss of whatever liquids there are that are important for producing life and sustaining life, so one approach is that this whole chapter and laws like it have to do with the loss of that which the life giver gave for life. That's one rationale. So there's this loss of these important fluids and that means a person is not whole. They're not sort of retaining the liquids that God has put in our body. I'm speaking as a prescientific person

here. We're losing that which God has given to us to produce life which means we are not whole, we are no longer as God made us to be. God is the life giver. He's given us this ability. He's given us these fluids within us to create and sustain life and when we lose that, especially as it's connected with a reproduction that renders us ritually unfit for sacred space because here's a related principle.

People who were not whole, for instance if they had a handicap or they were missing an eye or missing a limb or something, there were limitations to their occupation of sacred space, and it's not because they're evil or God doesn't like them. It was to teach the point of the perfection of God, the wholeness of God. And so these situations either a more permanent loss of something that made you whole or a temporary loss of something that made you whole like childbirth, excluding that person from sacred space was designed to teach you about the completeness of God and really the creation order. There's a lot that goes on in Leviticus that sort of honors the way God made things and they're doing what they were created to do. Life is going on the way it was created to be lived and the creation is functioning as God intended it to be. So there's this principle of wholeness, completeness, order, as opposed to chaos, as opposed to disorder and some sort of loss of life principle or violation of the good order that God created way back in Eden.

So this is sort of the underlying logic, at least into this particular approach. So the point isn't to associate the new life, the child, with death or loss of life but to associate the loss of the bodily fluids that make life possible and that God had given us to sustain life once we produce it. You can go back to Leviticus or go forward to Leviticus 17:11, the life of the flesh is in the blood, these sorts of ideas that they knew that there were certain things about the body. You couldn't just lose all your blood and still live. You lost enough of that, you're going to die. They knew how babies were made, through intercourse and what happens in intercourse. So they had this sense that there are things about the production of life and the maintenance of life that God has given us that when we lose that, then things are not the way God originally intended them to be. Now this loss is temporary so you're temporarily unfit for sacred space and so you have to wait a certain number of days and then you have a ritual procedure that indicates you have indeed waited a certain number of days.

There are offerings that are performed to make you fit for sacred space. None of this is about sin. It's about teaching the principle of sacred space, the completeness of God, that God is the life giver, all these big picture sorts of ideas. So when you have childbirth, there's this link in Leviticus 12 to menstruation. If you read in Leviticus 15, we're going to hit that, you're going to have menstruation mentioned there. You're going to have abnormal vaginal discharges. These things are going to be connected. So we'll be returning to some of these ideas but here we are in Leviticus 12 with the childbirth episode and that's one way to approach it. Now some scholars bring up a problem here. They'll say something like not all loss of bodily fluid was considered impure. And that's true. For instance, there's no specific impurity legislation in the Holiness code in Leviticus for things like breast milk or urine or sweat or puss or spit or vomit or anything like that. And so the reasoning goes well, these are losses of bodily fluids as well and so this approach about the incompleteness that childbirth produces in terms of bodily fluids is a bit wrongheaded.

Well, I would say that on the one hand, you can't say that all loss of bodily fluids or even all loss of blood, like you cut your finger, you get a bloody nose, or something like that, it's true that those don't render a person ritually impure or ritually unclean. The only ones that do are

linked to childbirth and intercourse, which is linked to childbirth as well. So there's something about the loss of those particular body fluids using the language of appearance, a prescientific mindset, what you see happening, what you know happens at intercourse and at that childbirth. It's only the loss of those particular fluids in those particular contexts that make ritual impurity part of the discussion. So I would say to that objection you're correct. That is a legitimate objection but you have to actually take a look at what is targeted to make sense out of it. If you're thinking in terms of these are the components, if I could say it that way. There are certain parts of the way God made us to produce life and to maintain life, semen, blood, vaginal discharge of blood.

I'm not going to get too far into this because in the ancient world, a female discharge or an orgasm by the woman was also considered to have input or it contributed to conception. There are other places in the Bible where this becomes an issue and there's Second Temple literature that makes this evident as well. We don't necessarily have that going on here and we won't have it going on Leviticus 15 but I bring it up just for this idea that individual people, individual Israelites in antiquity knew what happened at intercourse and they know what happens at childbirth. And so these particular laws reflect the idea that the things that God has given us bodily to produce life and to maintain it, when we lose that, we don't conform to the perfect order that God has created us with. We have lost some of the life force. It has to be restored.

We believe God will restore that and bring us back to wholeness if we way a certain number of days, if we follow these procedures and so on so forth and then we'll be fit for sacred space and that will be a sign to us that we're back to being whole now, that sort of thing. So you have to think about it in those terms to have it make any sort of sense. It's not our context. We don't think about these things this way but in antiquity, this is a very natural way to think about things and it's reflected in the Hebrew Bible here. The other approach, I've already hinted at it and that is systemic natural order, I guess that's the label I'm using for it. This is part of the bodily fluid thing that what happens at intercourse, what happens at childbirth, what happens at menstruation, because that's part of the reproductive cycle, that this is the way our bodies should work. This is normal natural order. If you want to skip ahead to Leviticus 15, you can say something like this. Leviticus 15, right around verses 16 and 17, you have laws of about seminal emissions. And so a seminal emission in the male, that has the normative function of impregnating a female and producing life.

This is how the ancient person would look at it. And so the reason that that makes a person, a man ritually impure is because it didn't happen during intercourse. It happened in some context or conception was an impossibility. And so that could be viewed as a dysfunction, in other words, it's not something immoral or anything like that. But since it happens outside the normal procedure of creating life, when it did happen, that rendered you ritually impure. It was just a reminder of the way things are supposed to function, the way God has made us, the way God has made nature and creation and all these sorts of things. So in Leviticus, seminal emission that occurs outside of sexual intercourse made you ritually unclean. There is no law in Leviticus that says when you conceive, you become unclean at that point, but you have these sort of telltale laws that try to take the sexual behavior and create sort of a framework, sort of a context for this is the way things should occur because this is how God has made us to create life and so on so forth.

So a lot of this stuff, a lot of this thinking is not only about the loss of bodily fluids that contribute to creating life and sustaining life but also the normativeness, that I'm calling the systemic natural order of things. I don't want to go down this road because we'll hit it in Leviticus eventually. This is actually the heart of the negative biblical view of homosexuality because you have sexual activity, sexual intercourse there that cannot produce life. And so when you did this intentionally for pleasure as opposed to; homosexuality was used in the ancient world often to humiliate people, men, and it was sort of like a violence or a punishment. But when you do it sort of willfully voluntarily in a substitutive sort of way for a heterosexual relationship, the reason it was viewed negatively is because it could not produce another life. And so it was sort of an act of death in that kind of thinking. You're doing this and there's no hope that you're going to conceive life.

This is why God gave us sex. This is why God gave us these things to create life and so on so forth. So it's going to be part of this underlying argument that, I'm going to use a phrase a lot of listeners will have heard, creation order. There is something to that cognitive framework, that mental approach to creation in the Bible. It is very important, especially in an ancient culture, that we do things that honor creation order and things that do not honor creation order, they're either criminalized or they become occasions for ritual impurity if there's no willful involvement here, like in Leviticus 15 with a seminal emission. There's what you have.

It's an involuntary sort of situation so we're not going to criminalize involuntary behavior. It's natural but to teach the principle that this occurred outside the framework of the normative creation order, the normative natural order, then there's something "amiss" and we have to rectify that by going through different ritual procedures, waiting a certain amount of days and then we're restored to wholeness and we can occupy sacred space. We don't think about these things at all this way but for the ancient Israelite, this was very much a part of their worldview so we have to factor that in. I think that becomes the context for a correct way to read this. I want to read something from Levine's Leviticus commentary because he brings another factor in here that people will find interesting that relates to the supernatural world, specifically what we would think of as the demonic world. Now here's what Levine says about the uncleanness of a postpartum mother. So here's one more thing you can add. Levine says,

Although the new mother was a source of joy to the community and her new child a blessing, she generated anxiety as did all aspects of fertility and reproduction in ancient society. The child-rearing mother was particularly vulnerable and her child was in danger, too, since infant mortality and frankly the mortality of mothers, women who had given birth to children was widespread in premodern societies. Lots of women died in childbirth. Lots of babies died, either in childbirth or shortly thereafter. We know this even on into the 19th and 20th centuries. This was a big deal so because of this, Levine says, by declaring the new mother impure, in other words, susceptible, the community sought to protect and shelter her. In other words, you kept an eye on her more during her period of impurity because there's going to be some isolation involved. You have to make sure that she's doing what she needs to do and not doing what is forbidden to her. So it was natural that more attention thrown on to her. Levine continues, in ancient times, concern for the

welfare of the mother and child was most often expressed as the fear of destructive demonic or antilife forces. This fear is evident in other Ancient Near Eastern texts contemporaneous with the biblical period. They are replete with incantations and spells against demons and witches who were thought to kill newborn children and afflict their mothers. It is reasonable to assume that similar anxieties were current among the ancient Israelites as well. And although biblical religion certainly did not permit magical spells and the like as the proper means for overcoming these perceived threats to life, it did provide ritual means as well as practical methods to accomplish for the Israelite mother and her community what magic was supposed to accomplish for the pagan mother.

MSH: So what Levine is saying here is true. There are just hundreds and hundreds of spells to ward off demons that would kill children during the night, what we would think of as a stillborn children, and we could come up with some medical reason or what would happened clinically. To the ancient person, this is the result of antilife forces, destructive demonic antilife forces to use Levine's terminology here. And so there were all sorts of spells and incantations, things you did for children, for newborns, from mothers who just given birth, to protect them against what were viewed as supernatural invasive forces just waiting to just squelch life in terms of the newborn child and the mother who was vulnerable. And so Levine's point here is that you're not going to see that solution in a biblical theology, but the solutions that are there, the various rituals, the waiting periods, the attentiveness to what the woman can and can't do, where she can and can't go, that kind of thing, it provides some practical means to just, in a nutshell, just keep an eye on her. Now what about the disparate number of days, male versus female child? So I'm going to quote Wenham here. He has a nice summary of this.

When a baby is born, Leviticus 12, the mother is contagiously unclean for one or two weeks, as unclean as she is during her menstrual period. We read that in Leviticus 12. It's more fully explained in Leviticus 15. That's the passage about the menstruation. In the week following menstruation a woman was not only unclean in herself and unable to visit the sanctuary, but anyone or anything she touched became unclean as well. On the eighth day, a boy had to be circumcised, but the woman remained unclean in herself though she would no longer pollute other people at that point. After the period of purification is over, 40 days for a boy, 80 for a girl, that's a total sum, the mother must bring a purification offering, what many translations unfortunately have as sin offering, and also a burnt offering for renewed fellowship with God.

MSH: So that how we approach the number of days here? Well, I think it's fair to say that a lot of scholars with respect to the boy opted for this explanation, seven days are attributed to the boy because on the eighth day, the boy would be circumcised. And so the woman when she gives birth to a boy is allowed to be among other people so that she can see the circumcision of her own son. In other words, she wouldn't miss the event. And so that seems to be for many the logic behind the number of days for the boy. For the female, for the baby girl, there's really no consensus to this.

Some scholars would say that the child may be related or this whole rule with the female child, the extended rule may be related to the belief that Levine talked about, supernatural threats to newborns and their mothers. Female newborns may be under more threat or it was thought they needed more attention, more care, more spells if you're a pagan because hostile forces, by killing her off, might undermine her ability to conceive children later in life or something like that.

So you'll read that, and I don't really buy that as an explanation. For the boy, it does make sense about the circumcision so I think there's probably something to that. But I think what we probably have here, or at least this needs to get on the table for the boy the circumcision, I think there's probably a prescientific biological distinction going on here. Now the rabbis talk about this and I'm just going to quote Levine again because he has a whole section on the rabbis trying to explain this, and Levine makes this comment that,

It was thought by the rabbis the male embryo was thought to be completely formed in 41 days and the female in 81 days, then he has a citation of some rabbinic commentary for the Talmud. That this view was current in the Ancient Near East is supported by ancient sources, specifically Aristotle, who's a Greek source. But making the comment that would apply more widely than just himself as a Greek but he's just reflecting on the way people thought in the ancient world. Aristotle held that the male was formed in 40 days and the female in three months, which is very close to the 80 day mark here in the Leviticus. Hippocrates thought that the male was formed in 30 days and 42 for the female.

MSH: So there's this disparity, I'll just stop those two examples. There's a disparity in other literature and the disparity is based upon the assumption the belief, there's nothing scientific about this, but the belief that one gender took this long essentially to be formed in the womb and be ready for birth and the female took this long, a different amount of days. And so that was why there was a disparity in any sort of thinking about how to respond to childbirth or how to treat a mother who had just given birth. I think there's something to this as well, that the disparity in the number of days in Leviticus has nothing to do with what the cultures thought about the genders.

Oh, this one's just closer to cleanness, closer to God. The male's closer to God than the woman. I don't think that has anything to do with it. I think it goes back to certain beliefs, prescientific beliefs about what happens in the womb with each gender. I think that needs to be on the table. I think it could actually be that simple. With the boy it also does make sense to have at least have the mother able to witness the circumcision of her own child and so that there would be a restriction for the first part of the impurity period, to the seven days there. So there's no consensus on all of that but those the two things I think belong on the table. The circumcision does play a role and then again, the prescientific beliefs about what happens in the womb I think needs to be on the table, too. So let's shift to Leviticus 13 and 14. Chapter 13 is dealing with skin diseases, what we commonly think of as leprosy. Chapter 14 carries on the discussion about skin diseases and what to do about them and also "skin diseases in houses and other objects." So we want to say something about these two chapters. Let's just read the first eight verses of Leviticus 13. It says,

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ²“When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a case of leprous disease on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests, ³ and the priest shall examine the diseased area on the skin of his body. And if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a case of leprous disease. When the priest has examined him, he shall pronounce him unclean. ⁴ But if the spot is white in the skin of his body and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall shut up the diseased person for seven days. ⁵ And the priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if in his eyes the disease is checked and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall shut him up for another seven days. ⁶ And the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the diseased area has faded and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption. And he shall wash his clothes and be clean. ⁷ But if the eruption spreads in the skin, after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest. ⁸ And the priest shall look, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a leprous disease.

MSH: So those are the first eight verses. The ESV, even though they translate this leprous disease, there's a footnote in the ESV translation that says leprosy was a term for several skin diseases. What we have here, the Hebrew word is *tsaraath*, is not leprosy as it is known medically in the modern world. So what we have in the first few verses here, there's some sort of swelling, some sort of discoloration of the skin. If the afflicted person suspects, he must go to the priest, then he goes. It's the priest determines whether he's unclean or not. We just read the passage. So you have a priest here. This is not a doctor. It's not even an ancient doctor. It's a priest, which should be one clue to tell us that since this is a concern of the priest, this has something to do not with medical practice and diagnosis and medical principles for us today and all that kind of stuff.

It has to do with ritual impurity, ritual uncleanness, in other words, unfitness to occupy sacred space. So let's talk a little bit about what is actually going on. *Tsaraath*, skin disease is how I'm going to translate that, is actually not leprosy as we know it in the modern world. And you'll actually find rabbinic commentary that understood this. They understood in early modern period what would eventually be called leprosy. The term for it today is Hansen's disease. They understood that what Leviticus was talking about wasn't that, it was something else. So this is not something totally new in the wake of modern medicine. It's actually been a distinction known before of what we think of as modern medicine. The discrepancies really are between skin disease in the ESV translation or any of the translations using a term like leprosy, the discrepancy there's usually due to translation tradition. The Septuagint, actually the Greek word in used in the Septuagint for *tsaraath*, skin disease, is *leprah* and *leprah* in Greek is just a generic skin disease.

That's all it was. Even back as far as the Septuagint, they understood this is a term you would use for a variety of skin conditions and not just what would later be identified as what we

would call true leprosy. So let's talk about leprosy a little bit. Hansen's disease is the modern name for this. Hansen's disease, true leprosy, mutilates people. It disfigures people. Your skin turns lumpy. Your eyeballs are glazed. You can lose digits, fingers and toes. Let me just read you a clinical description of leprosy.

Hansen's disease is primarily a disease of the skin and peripheral nerves. It is of two kinds; tuberculoid and lepromatous. Twenty percent of leprosy victims develop the lepromatous form which is characterized by skin lesions that appear over most of the body. The skin of the forehead and face thickens with natural lines becoming exaggerated and loss of facial hair can occur. In the tuberculoid form, single skin lesions and loss of feeling in the affected area are the usual early symptoms. Now leprosy is a contagious. Hansen's disease is contagious but it's not highly contagious. Back to the clinical definition here, transmission of the infection actually requiring prolonged and closed contact. The bacteria appear to spread from the skin and nasal mucosa of those suffering from leprosy but the exact portal of entry is not known. Although there is no conclusive evidence, the respiratory tract seems to be the most likely means of contracting the disease. Skin, especially broken skin, is also a possible source of infection.

MSH: So that description has quite a number of disconnects with what we're reading here in Leviticus 13. Just as a point of trivia, modern leprosy treatment started in about the '40s. It's treated with antibiotics now and they're certain surgical techniques that have allowed people suffering from Hansen's disease, true leprosy, to live fairly normal lives and avoid the extreme isolation. So it is treatable. Antibiotics are probably the most effective way of treating it. It certainly wasn't hey, the hair on your skin turned white. What you really have in Leviticus 13 where basically the priest diagnosis' someone as having *tsaraath* that isolates them and maybe 14 days later, it will go away.

This is not what real leprosy does and this has been known for quite some time, so biblical *tsaraath* doesn't really align with these symptoms of true leprosy. The only real thing *tsaraath* has in common with Hansen's disease is that it's a skin problem. Methods of diagnosis are different. There's no allusion in Leviticus 13 to hideous facial or digit deformity, loss of digits, nerve damage, rotting of parts of the body. There's nothing like that, so the description here and the diagnosis does not align with true leprosy. Now what about the description? If we go to Leviticus 13:18-23, we get a little bit more.

¹⁸“If there is in the skin of one's body a boil and it heals, ¹⁹and in the place of the boil there comes a white swelling or a reddish-white spot, then it shall be shown to the priest. ²⁰And the priest shall look, and if it appears deeper than the skin and its hair has turned white, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is a case of leprous disease that has broken out in the boil. ²¹But if the priest examines it and there is no white hair in it and it is not deeper than the skin, but has faded, then the priest shall shut him up seven days.

MSH: So what we read there is there's some sort a skin problem going on. There is actually no explanation for how it happens. In other words, the causes are sorted taken for granted. They're not given in Leviticus 13. It's just something that happens. The person pronounced unclean is isolated outside the camp because that person could well pollute others. The isolation is ultimately about protecting sacred space. We don't want this infected person to make someone else ritually impure and then that person may not know it, may wander into sacred space, and now we have a problem, so we isolate this person. The unclean person has to tear their clothes. They leave their hair. We're not going to read the whole passage but they have to tear their clothes. They leave their hair unkempt. They're supposed to cover the lower part of their face and warn others to stay away by shouting unclean, all that sort of thing. It's interesting that the torn clothes, the covering of the face and leaving your hair all crazy, those are part of mourning rituals.

When someone died, you tear your clothes; tear your hair out, that kind of thing. We see this elsewhere in the Old Testament. These are signs of mourning someone's death. Well, in this case, it's like the person that has the skin disease is mourning his or her own death. They're like the walking dead. That's just the way they're looked at and really the way they're supposed to consider themselves. It's not that they're going to die. If you read through Leviticus 13, this isn't something where you're going to drop over dead or this is going to kill you. That's another disconnect from Hansen's disease because if you lose enough flesh and this could be serious, this could be fatal, but what it meant was that they would have to be permanently cut off from the Israelite camp, from sacred space, from the priesthood. They are permanently cut off from the blessings of the covenant.

And so the mourning rituals sort of makes sense because a life blessed by the true God was effectively made impossible if you had this disease and if you were permanently isolated by it. So this is another indication that when the person is healed, when it looks like they don't have leprosy disease but it's something else, they perform the ritual of cleansing to be readmitted to the community. It's not that they're being forgiven for sin or God's sending the leprosy there. There's nothing like that. What the cure is the "cure", this has nothing to do with medicine. The cure is to let you live among God's people so that you can partake of the blessings of the covenant. It's religious in nature. It's ritual, it's about sacred space and being part of the covenant community. Now in a Leviticus 14, we get a discussion of the treatment and I'm using that word lightly, sort of with a grain of salt because it's not a medical treatment. It's a ritual that is done to restore the person to community fellowship. It has nothing to do with actual medicine. Wenham in his Leviticus commentary summarizes it nicely so I'll read a little bit from him.

If a man thinks they have recovered from the skin disease, the priest is summoned to examine him. [**MSH: This is the first part of Leviticus 14.**] If the priest agrees that the man is cured, two clean birds are brought. One has to be killed and its blood caught, captured, put in a container, and mixed with fresh water contained in an earthenware vessel. Some of it is sprinkled over the man using cedarwood, scarlet cord and hyssop. The living bird is also dipped into the blood and then allowed to fly away free. Then the man himself must shave all over and wash himself and his clothes. He is then clean enough to reenter the camp but not to live at

home yet. **[MSH: This hasn't this has no medical value to it. It's all ritual. It's about ritual restoration. Wenham continues and says]**

These rituals are termed by anthropologist writes of aggregation, in other words, ceremonies in which a person who is an abnormal social condition is re-integrated into ordinary society. Shaving, washing, offering sacrifice are regular ingredients of such rituals. Shaving and washing obviously portray cleansing, sort of like an illustration of an object lesson of cleansing from the pollution caused by the skin disease and the life of uncleanness implicit in having to dwell outside the camp. Dipping the one bird in the blood of the other and sprinkling that blood on the worshiper is an action that at least establishes a visible relationship between the worshiper and the birds, between the worshiper and sacrifices, this ritual, between the worshiper and the ritual. The bird let loose in the open country is a symbolic representation of release from the disease.

MSH: Now you notice the birds used are clean birds. They're ritually cleaned, the whole list of clean and unclean animals. The bird used is ritually clean so that's important. The blood water mixture is a ritual cleansing agent to visually convey the idea of cleansing. They're ritual acts and not medical acts. Now what about the restoration? Let's just look in Leviticus 14:1-9. Let me find that real quickly and read a little bit of that.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“This shall be the law of the leprous person for the day of his cleansing. He shall be brought to the priest, ³ and the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall look. Then, if the case of leprous disease is healed in the leprous person, ⁴ the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop. ⁵ And the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. ⁶ He shall take the live bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water. ⁷ And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease. Then he shall pronounce him clean and shall let the living bird go into the open field. ⁸ And he who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes and shave off all his hair and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean. And after that he may come into the camp, but live outside his tent seven days. ⁹ And on the seventh day he shall shave off all his hair from his head, his beard, and his eyebrows. He shall shave off all his hair, and then he shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and he shall be clean. ¹⁰ “And on the eighth day he shall take two male lambs without blemish, and one ewe lamb a year old without blemish, and a grain offering of three tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, and one log of oil. ¹¹ And the priest who cleanses him shall set the man who is to be cleansed and these things before the LORD, at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ¹² And the priest shall take one of the male lambs and offer it for a guilt offering, along with the log of oil, and wave them for a wave offering before the LORD. ¹³ And he shall kill the lamb in the place where they kill the sin offering and the burnt offering, in

the place of the sanctuary. For the guilt offering, like the sin offering, belongs to the priest; it is most holy.

MSH: So what happens is initially, the person is cleansed through the initial ritual that Wenham talked about, that he summarized so that they can rejoin the community. And on the eighth day, that's after seven days. On the eighth day, the priest brings him right to the edge of sacred space and then some offerings are performed and that signifies now you're sort of graduating from being allowed in the community and now you are going to be cleansed. You're going to be made fit again for sacred space. So all of it, the whole procedure, is about being fit to occupy, to tread on, to participate in sacred space. There are elements here also found Leviticus 16, which is the Day of Atonement, kind of interesting about the sprinkling of blood. In Leviticus 14, the blood of the bird is sprinkled seven times over the worshiper and the priest declares him clean.

In Leviticus 16, the blood of the second goat is sprinkled onto the mercy seat. So there's actually a ritual connection between what happens here and what happens in Leviticus 16 when the priest is making atonement for the whole nation. It's just another connection that shows what's happening in Leviticus 14 is the person is suffering from the skin disease is about sacred space. It's not about sin. It's not about medicine or anything like that. Now what about the rationale? What does all this mean as we wrap up here? I think it's clear, and I've said it over and over again, might as well say it one more time. Leviticus' laws and rituals are about marking sacred space and maintaining the sanctity of that space, protecting the presence of God from impurity. This is why you isolate people. This is why people have to go through some of the sacrifices and offerings we read about earlier so that God can look at them and they are "atoned" for, not in the sense they've committed a sin but they are made right in God's eyes to participate in sacred space as much as they're allowed, bringing offerings to the priest. And there are limitations for how far the normal person can walk and all that kind of stuff but that's what these offerings are about.

For order to be restored, the balance, because Leviticus and the sacred space idea is really about the balance between space that is sacred and space that isn't. To sort of keep that balance, restore it, the violator, the offender, the person afflicted has to be made correct through these rituals. If they resist them, they don't want to do them, they neglect them, that's going to impair a right relationship between God and that person and frankly, God and his people. We've seen other people suffer for not doing things the correct way. That affects the whole community. So to be in right relationship with God in terms of his presence, you got to do these things. But why would a person with skin disease a threat to sacred space? Why do they have to be removed? You can't really help this. You get a skin disease, okay. Well, it's kind of the same thing as Leviticus 12.

You can't really help childbirth either. You get pregnant. You're going to have a child. You're going to lose semen in intercourse, Leviticus 15. These things just happen. That's actually partially the point. There's no sin here involved in the skin disease in *tsaraath*. It's a mistake to take instances like Meriam in Numbers 12, the house of Joab in 2 Samuel 3, there's the Gehazi incident, Elijah servant in 2 Kings 5. They're all struck with leprosy because of some sin they commit. In Leviticus, that is not the case. You read Leviticus 13-14, there is no association with sin with this disease, whatever the *tsaraath* is. It's never characterized that way. Now in the view of the priestly material here, none of these events, childbirth, genital discharge, corpse contact,

skin disease, none of those are about sin. And I think it's important to mention Numbers 5:2 in this regard. I'll just read you that one verse. Numbers 5:2,

²“Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead.

MSH: Bodily discharges, contact with the dead and the skin disease are all lumped into that one verse and none of them are inherently unnatural. None of them are about sin. They're all natural and largely unavoidable. Skin disease is put in the same bucket. So the rationale for it has nothing do with God being displeased. I think the issue, just as we saw with Leviticus 12, it's an issue of imperfection. It's an issue of not being whole, of not being the way God made you, that there's something wrong, there's something amiss with your body either in terms of its function or bringing up other examples here, blindness or lupus or loss of a limp, or something like that, physical handicaps. People are excluded from sacred space when there is something amiss about their wholeness as a person which involves their body. And the idea is not to condemn that person. The idea is to teach positively the perfection and completeness of God and the original creation order that is the ideal because this is what God is going to be associated with. He's going to be associated with Eden.

The sacred space of the tabernacle, think back to we talk about cosmic mountain, the divine council worldview and all this kind of stuff. This plays a part in it because what's going to be associated with God is wholeness and perfection, where God lives, his abode, the space that is marked off as his, must be associated with life and not death, with wholeness, not incompleteness, with the ideal embodied life in its ideal form versus embodied life of humanity in less than ideal form. It's about teaching a distinction between the perfection of God, the perfection of God's abode, the perfection of where God is and your world. Your world is a little less than perfect. You need to be reminded of that. This doesn't have anything to do with sin. It doesn't have anything to do with your spiritual commitment to Yahweh, your loyalty to Yahweh. The hope of the Old Testament person is that upon death that they will be with the Lord. They will be in His presence, so that hope doesn't go away. It doesn't disappear. It's not impaired in any way.

But life in this physical world, life in the embodied world, is never going to be all that it could be in relationship to the perfection of God. And so these conditions of impurity, these conditions of lesserness, of incompleteness, unwholeness, are designed to teach that idea, to teach the distinction. And so that I think is what we can sort of glean from these chapters. We might as well just throw Leviticus 15 in here because there was so much of it in there. But it's a reverence for creation order. It's a reverence for God's perfection. It's an acknowledgment of being lesser, of being imperfect, of not being able to attain or sustain or maintain the kind of life that is associated with the very presence of God. So it's reverence for creation order, reverence for life itself. We should respect life and the normativity of life as it was designed by the Creator. When we don't, we put that at threat, not that we're stronger than God but God can withdraw from us. God might punish.

God might leave. God might do something that puts an obstacle between you the offender or the violator, especially if it's some sort of deliberate resistance to doing what you need to do and your status as being loyal to Yahweh, your salvation catching that in Old

Testament terms, loyalty to Yahweh alone and not having another god or no god at all. So when you don't observe these things, you align yourselves with the forces of chaos, with the forces of dysfunction. You resist. The will of the true God who has somehow, for some reason, in Deuteronomy, says just because he loves you, made a covenant relationship with you so why are you dissing that? Why would you? These are the big picture ideas I think come across when we think about passages like Leviticus 12-14, throwing chapter 15 in there that we can take away and think about. It's just something good to think about, our respect for life and creation order in the normativity of life as it was created and also the utter otherness of God. 50:42