

Fertility, Futility, and Filth: Menstruation Imagery in Isaiah 64:6

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“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isa 64:6 NIV).

A quick internet search of “Isaiah 64:6 used tampon” reveals transcripts, sermons, and commentary excerpts that use menstruation imagery to discuss how impossible it is for human efforts at righteousness to please God. Anecdotally, we have heard from many people who remember uncomfortable sermons or Bible studies where teachers emphasized the disgusting nature of menstrual pads and tampons to prove this point. English translation choices such as “filthy,” “polluted,” and “rags” bolster the theological position that humans are totally depraved. Not every sermon or commentary on Isaiah 64 takes this approach, but those that do end up normalizing contempt for the God-designed bodily functions of women¹ and displacing other meaningful aspects of the imagery of Isaiah 64:6.

We will explore the history of Christian attitudes toward menstruating women and how menstruation-related imagery was habitually used to talk about sin, righteousness, and judgment during the Protestant Reformation. We will then consider how the Hebrew Scriptures use patterns of imagery to talk about sin, righteousness, and judgment, and will derive from this a reading of Isaiah 64:6.

Early Christian Perspectives on Menstruation

Despite Jesus’s gracious and exemplary treatment of a ritually unclean bleeding woman (Matt 9:20–22, Mark 5:25–34, Luke 8:43–48), male church leaders over the centuries have perpetuated menstrual taboos to distance themselves from their discomfort with women, their bodies, and blood.² As early as AD 241, Dionysius, the Archbishop of Alexandria, taught that “menstruous women ought not to come to the Holy Table, or touch the Holy of Holies, nor to churches, but pray elsewhere.”³ By the fourth century, menstrual restrictions from the Hebrew Scriptures were adopted in the church, and Jerome, the prominent theologian and Bible translator, taught that “nothing is so unclean as a menstruant.”⁴ In the sixth century, Isidore, the archbishop of Seville, relied on the writings of the Roman physician Pliny the Elder to teach that menstruating women were dangerous and polluted the world.⁵ By the seventh century, Theodore, the Archbishop of Canterbury, prohibited menstruating women from entering churches or receiving communion.⁶ Some influential leaders, including Pope Gregory I in the sixth century, argued against preventing menstruating women from serving in liturgical roles or receiving the Eucharist, but the more dominant exclusionary views prevailed.⁷

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The English Translation of Isaiah 64:6

The lived reality of these prohibitions meant that everyone from children to adults was regularly reminded that female bodies and sexuality were sinfully corrupted and dangerous. English translation decisions over time reinforced this perspective. In the fourteenth century, the Latin Vulgate’s *pannus menstruatae* of Isaiah 64:6 was translated into English as “menstruous clouts.” “Menstruous” connoted something defiled with menstrual blood, and “clouts” referred to rags used for wiping after defecating.⁸ “Menstruous” was replaced

or modified in later English paraphrases of, and allusions to, Isaiah 64:6 with adjectives such as “vile,” “polluted,” “filthy,” “bloody,” and “foul.” Translations and paraphrases often added the word “woman,” shifting the focus of the imagery from the filthy blood-stained cloth to the filthy menstruating woman. A 1534 English primer published by the Catholic Church paraphrased Isaiah 64:6 as “and we are all wrapped in filthy uncleanness: yea, all our righteousness is spotted like the clouts of a menstruous woman,” and in 1582, Englishman Thomas Bentley wrote about “this our giltye and polluted nature, the fowle menstruous cloth of a woman.”⁹

A crucial shift happened as these cultural and religious concepts combined with repeated references to Isaiah 64:6 in Reformation-era sermons and catechesis. The connotation of the word “menstruous” became synonymous in vernacular English with spiritual and moral corruption. By 1596, the popular lexicon *The English Schoolmaster* defined “menstruous” as “defiled,” and by 1623, *Cockeram’s English Dictionary* defined “filthy” as “menstruous, torrid, obscene.”¹⁰

In seventeenth-century Puritan poetry, menstrual blood stains became a conventional metaphor for original sin and total depravity, and terms such as “spot,” “stain,” and “blot” were euphemisms for menstrual blood. A 1618 devotional poem speaks of putting off “Sins rags impure/ Those Menstruous clothes wherewith I am disguised/ Whereby thine Image in mee’s not agnized [recognized]/ Whereby in thy pure sight I am but loathed.”¹¹

Some clergy even began to object that the word “menstruous” was itself obscene to use in the pulpit. The Irish theologian Edward Nicholson complained in 1712 that its use was so unreasonably common among the Calvinists that their youngest boys knew this “monstrous reproachful name” by heart, and he entreated ministers to use the more modest word “filthy,” like the Geneva Bible did.¹² A 1708 medical textbook for physicians, who certainly knew that menstruation had natural causes unrelated to sin, described the female womb as “a sink of filths [which] testifies to an unobliterable sin.”¹³ This progression reveals how the concept of

sin and corruption (in specific English-speaking Christian cultural contexts) became linked to menstruation and womanhood.

Future theological endeavors did not question the association, and it has affected English Bible translation, exegesis, and commentary to the present day. We asked one of the members of the original all-male translation team for the NIV why they chose “filthy rags.” He explained how the team was divided, with the older members unwilling to opt for a translation that would bring female reproductive terms into the pulpit. The men consulted their wives, some of whom suggested using “period” in some way. But ultimately the team “judged it best not to use any term that would offend some.”¹⁴

Most contemporary English translations maintain imprecise language choices around the translation of “unclean” and “menstrual cloth/garment.” Almost all of them obscure the connection to menstruation (only CEB and NET use the word “menstrual”), and instead of the more literal and neutral “cloth” or “garment,” overwhelmingly use the word “rag” (CEB, CEV, ISV, JUB, MEV, MSG, NCB, NET, NIV, NKJV, NLT, VOICE) and pejorative words like “polluted” (CSB, ESV, WEB) or “filthy” (CEV, GNT, ISV, JUB, LSB, MEV, NASB, NCB, NIV, NKJV, NCV, NLT, NRSVue).

Instead of the more neutral choice of “unclean” or “unfit to worship you” (CEV), which could refer to the ritual impurity that accompanied marital sexual activity and menstruation but did not necessarily entail sin, some translators went so far as to use phrases like “infected and impure with sin” (NLT), “sin-infected, sin-contaminated” (MSG), “dirty with sin” (NCV), “sinful” (GNT) and “compromised with impurity” (VOICE). These choices reveal the way translators blended and sometimes even equated the physiological activity of menstruation and the concept of sin. Not a single major English Bible¹⁵ translates the verse with a neutral and uninterpreted rendering that does not impose cultural assumptions on the intended meaning. This suggests that the English-speaking world still conceives of menstrual blood stains as somehow particularly loathsome and still associates the biological phenomenon of menstrual blood with the concepts of spiritual corruption, sin, and moral filth.

With this, we turn to explore how our interpretive inferences might be different from those of the ancient Israelite audience and what that might mean for interpreting biblical imagery in general and Isaiah 64:6 in particular.

The Patterns of Agriculture and Reproduction Imagery

The Hebrew Scriptures frequently deploy plant imagery to describe human conditions.¹⁶ Protected, secure people are compared to plants growing in walled gardens (e.g., Ps 80:8–15). God-as-gardener carefully transplants to fertile, well-irrigated soil and provides expert cultivation (e.g., Isa 5:1–7; Amos 9:15). Irrigation or rain in dry land is linked to God’s provision and blessing (e.g., Ps 1:3, 107:35). Judgment, exile, and death are linked to uprooting and withering (e.g., 1 Kgs 14:15; Job 15:32). The ephemerality and frailty of human life is linked to short-lived shallow-rooted plants like wildflowers and grass that are easily scorched by the sun and displaced by the wind (e.g., Ps 37:2, 103:15; Isa 40:6–8). Sinful lives and worthless legacies

are linked to dead or discarded plants like withered leaves, grass, chaff, straw, stubble, weeds (e.g., Ps 1:4, 37:1–2). Enduring legacies and righteous or prosperous lives are linked to sheltered, well-irrigated plants with deep or regenerative roots, and to plants that produce something valued such as oaks, cedars, palms, olive trees, grape vines, myrtle, and willows (e.g., Ps 92:13–15; Isa 61:3; Hos 14:6).

These prevalent conceptual links between plants and people created patterns of related meanings. Wombs and land can be barren or fertile; women without children and land without inhabitants are both desolate. Plants and men contribute seed to new life; wombs and certain plants bear fruit. Words associated with propagation (e.g., seed, shoot/branch, fruit) have senses related to both plants and family or ancestry.

Additionally, agriculture and reproduction are portrayed as processes that lead to predictable results which can be evaluated in terms of success or failure. Just as there is association between wombs and fields, there is a link between figuratively describing the beginning of a process either as a conception or pregnancy or as a plowing and planting (e.g., Isa 61:11; Hos 10:12–13a). Just as there is an association between family and ancestry terms and propagation terms, there is a link between describing successful processes as either births or harvests and unsuccessful processes as either infertility or failed harvests (e.g., Prov 22:8). Pregnancy and harvest imagery are often combined with sin/judgment and righteousness/reward imagery; for example, the godless “conceive trouble and give birth to evil, and their womb prepares deceit” (Job 15:34–35 ESV). The wicked man “conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and gives birth to lies” (Ps 7:14 ESV). In contrast, the prophet exhorts the faithful to “sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love” (Hos 10:12a NRSVue).

Sometimes imagery of conception and birth (or the lack thereof) is blended with futility imagery from agriculture to communicate a message of judgment for the failure to be “fruitful” and produce the intended result of righteousness (e.g., Isa 33:11 NIV: “you conceive chaff, you give birth to straw”). The imagery of wind carrying off withered plants is used in passages about judgment for failure to produce righteousness (Isa 17:13, 37:27, 40:24). Sometimes images from agriculture are combined with images from reproduction, such as we see in Ps 58:7–8 where wasted water and withered grass blends with a stillbirth in imagery of futility. Furthermore, the book of Isaiah—alongside other Hebrew prophetic writings—figuratively presents Israel as God’s bride (e.g., Isa 49:19–21, 62:4–5; Hos 2:19–20) and God’s garden or vineyard (e.g., Isa 5:1–7, 60:21), and the figurative language used to describe the state of Israel’s relationship with God frequently draws from and blends implicit bride and garden pictures (Isa 1:29–30, 66:5–13; Jer 2:2–4).¹⁷

The Pattern of Cloth Imagery

Isaiah 64:6 evokes futility imagery from agriculture with its reference to a shriveled leaf blown in the wind. Should we read the paired imagery of a menstrual cloth as similar futility imagery from reproduction, or does soiled cloth communicate something else? People may rightly point out that in the Bible, the image of red dyed or permanently stained cloth is associated with sin: “though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow” (Isa 1:18 ESV).¹⁸

Language about removing sin's stain or washing away the filth of sin expresses forgiveness and restoration (e.g., Ps 51:2, 7; Isa 1:15–16; Jer 2:22; Zech 13:1). In other texts, God replaces the rags of sin or shame with the new, clean clothing of righteousness or honor (e.g., Zech 3:3–5).

Ritual cleansing was foundational to the purity laws¹⁹ that governed who was welcomed into communal Israelite life and worship and who was separated out as “unclean.” These purity laws are referenced in Isaiah 64:6: “we have all become like one who is unclean.” It is understandable, then, that interpreters across the centuries connected “unclean” with “morally corrupted by sin” and perceived a link between blood-stained menstrual cloths and moral and spiritual impurity. But it is worth asking: did the original audience's understanding of ritual impurity include a particular disgust for bodily processes or a perception that menstruation itself was an expression of moral corruption?

In ancient times, menstruating women were *ritually* unclean, but people could become ritually impure for many reasons, including things outside of their control like bleeding, nocturnal emissions, skin disease, mold, and exposure to dead things.²⁰ Anthropologist Mary Douglas defines the concept of “dirt” as “matter out of place” and argues that “unclean” in ancient purity systems has nothing to do with our modern concept of hygiene.²¹ In order to understand what counts as “unclean” or “polluted” in a given society, we must first examine the patterns that govern what is considered an anomaly and therefore “unclean” and perhaps dangerous. Using this analysis, menstrual blood would be unclean, not because it was considered dirty in the sense of unhygienic or disgusting, but because it was an anomaly that disrupted the expected patterns for blood. Furthermore, like a nocturnal emission, a menstrual stain is an irregularity that showcases diminished life-giving capacity and brings impurity because of association with death.²²

By law, a menstruating woman was required to separate herself from her husband and the rest of the ritually pure community (Lev 15:19–30). Women were required to undergo ritual cleansing to be restored to sexual intimacy and to participation in community worship.²³ Historian Sara Read points out that ancient women did not use dedicated menstrual protection analogous to modern sanitary napkins or tampons that are thrown away after use. They likely washed their legs at the end of a day and laundered and reused the innermost garments they wore while menstruating²⁴ since cloth was labor-intensive and costly to produce.²⁵

As we work to decipher the imagery of stained menstrual cloths, it is important to remember that Isaiah 64 is not an oracle of judgment where God is expressing dismay over Israel's sinfulness. It is a lament in which the prophet is pleading for God's deliverance: “Look down from heaven and see” (Isa 63:15), “Turn back for the sake of your servants” (63:17), “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Isa 64:1). It includes a collective remembrance of God's power and loving faithfulness in the past “when you did awesome things that we did not expect” (Isa 64:3), and a claim to God's promise to “meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways” (Isa 64:5 NRSVue).

Isaiah 64:5b–7 presents the issue that the poet is lamenting—Israel's state of fruitlessness which is deserving of God's judgment:

But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a [menstrual cloth/garment]. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name or attempts to take hold of you, for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. (NRSVue)

Forging the links between all the elements in the imagery provides a key to interpretation. A reference to ritual impurity and separation, a reference to menstruation, a reference to righteousness and sin, a reference to a fading leaf blown away in the wind—all should cohere. We review these in the light of the discussion so far:

One who is unclean: Ritually unclean individuals are separated from God. Ritually unclean married women are separated from marital intimacy. Ritual impurity requires ritual cleansing to end separation and resume sexual intimacy, through which new life could be conceived (fruitfulness).

Menstrual cloth/garment: Menstruation indicates ritual impurity. A woman's fertility and ritual state are important to the marriage relationship. The appearance of blood indicates to her husband that she is “fruitless.” It is a sign of infertility, and wives deemed “barren” are often sent away “desolate.”

Righteousness: Righteousness is linked to successful (fruitful) processes like live births and good harvests. Restored righteousness and rewarded righteousness are often pictured as dew or irrigation that brings flourishing to a dry, desolate land.

Wither like a leaf: Withering or fading is associated with loss of vitality and strength as well as failing to flourish and be fruitful. Like a menstruating woman, a withered leaf is linked figuratively to physical weakness, fainting, illness, and being sapped of strength.²⁶ Dried out leaves become separated from the rooted plant and are easily blown away by the wind, and are therefore linked with futility and worthlessness.

The images are linked and blended to lament the sterility of God's people (64:6, 10), to concede the justice of God's judgment (64:3–5, 7), and to plead with God for restoration (64:8–9, 12). Imagining how these images function together might lead to an intended meaning more like: “We are like a menstruating woman who is separated from intimacy with her husband. Like a husband hoping for a child, you came looking for righteousness in us. What you found was an indicator of our infertility. Like a menstruating woman, like a withering leaf, your bride shows signs of death rather than life.”

What a powerful lament to precede the poet's plea for restoration! It fits so well with the eschatological visions of restored righteousness found elsewhere in the book of Isaiah expressed through the imagery of fertility and flourishing.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, pastors who choose to spotlight the “filthy rags” of Isaiah 64:6 rarely seem to have these patterns in mind. Instead,

they present the verse as if it is a simple metaphor, suggesting that the characteristic that righteousness and menstrual cloths have in common is that they are contemptible or worthless. This train of thought often leads to the inference that all of our best efforts will only ever be like the filthiest of rags in God's sight, or that God is repulsed by us or our efforts. This conclusion directly contradicts numerous passages of Scripture that indicate God delights in righteousness and rewards people for their righteous lives (e.g., 2 Sam 22:21–25; Ps 84:11). Perhaps the fact that this skewed reading has endured goes to show the power of imagery. If people walk

away from a sermon hearing “your righteousness is like a used tampon,” the inferences they draw from that imagery will preach louder than any scholarly disclaimers.

The reading of Isaiah 64:6 that we have offered challenges interpretations that draw on misogynistic views of menstruation and the emphasis on human depravity that is seen in some streams of the Western Protestant Christian tradition. It seeks to reclaim the rich biblical imagery voiced in this passage—confession, lament, and the hope that the Lord will restore.

Notes

1. Sara Read argues that commands to cast off sin like menstrual rags and sermons comparing human righteousness to defiled menstrual rags were so prevalent and influential in Protestant England in the early sixteenth through the mid-eighteenth centuries that it created a “culture of silence” around women's health and menstrual hygiene that lasted for hundreds of years. Sara Read, “Thy Righteousness Is But a Menstrual Clout: Sanitary Practices and Prejudice in Early Modern England,” *Early Modern Women* 3 (Fall 2008) 15–17.
2. See William E. Phipps, “The Menstrual Taboo in the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 19/4 (1980) 298–303.
3. Dionysius, *The Letter of the Blessed Dionysius*, Canon II.
4. Jerome, *Against Helvidius* 20, Commentary on Zacharias 13).
5. Bethan Hindson, “Attitudes Towards Menstruation and Menstrual Blood in Elizabethan England,” *Journal of Social History* 43/1 (2009) 92.
6. Phipps, “The Menstrual Taboo,” 300.
7. Phipps, “The Menstrual Taboo,” 301.
8. Read, “Thy Righteousness Is But a Menstrual Clout,” 5.
9. See Ursula Potter, “Menstruation and Coming of Age,” in *Gender: Time*, MacMillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks, ed. Karin Sellberg (MacMillan Reference USA, 2018) 188.
10. Potter, “Menstruation and Coming of Age,” 186–90.
11. Read, “Thy Righteousness Is but a Menstrual Clout,” 14.
12. Edward Nicholson, *The Death-Bed Repentance fully consider'd proving that no mere death-bed repentance can be effectual to salvation* (Dublin: Printed by A. Rhames for the Author, 1712) 126–27. Cited in Read, “Thy Righteousness is But a Menstrual Clout,” 16.
13. Potter, “Menstruation and Coming of Age,” 190.
14. Email with Dr. Bruce Waltke and Marissa Burt, Dec. 4, 2023.
15. Translations consulted include CEB, CEV, CSB, ESV, GNT, ISV, JUB, LSB, MEV, MSG, NASB, NCB, NCV, NET, NIV, NKJV, NLT, NRSVue, VOICE, WEB.
16. Alec Blasson, “‘People are Plants’—A Conceptual Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible,” *OTE* 19/2 (2006) 573–83.
17. For further reading on the bridal imagery, see: Elizabeth Ann R. Willett, “Unveiling Old Testament Women with Accurate Translation,” *Priscilla Papers* 33/4 (2019) 13–14.
18. The color scarlet is probably intended to evoke imagery of Zion as an unfaithful bride or prostitute in Isa 1:18. See Scott B. Noegel, “Scarlet and Harlots: Seeing Red in the Hebrew Bible,” *HUCA*, 87 (2016) 27–32.
19. See Lev 12–14; Num 5:1–4, 19:11–12.
20. See Lev 11, 14, 15.
21. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966; repr. Routledge Classics, 2005) 48–50.
22. For further reading on the significance of death impurity and menstruation, see Havilah Dharamraj, “Jesus the High Priest: A South Asian Reading,” in *Prophet, Priest, and King: Christology in Global Perspective*, ed. Michael S. Horton, Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Justin S. Holcomb (Zondervan Academic, 2024) 134–37.
23. See Avraham Faust and Hayah Katz, “The Archaeology of Purity and Impurity: A Case-Study from Tel ‘Elom, Israel,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 27/1 (2017) 1–27.
24. Read, “Thy Righteousness Is But a Menstrual Clout,” 4–5.
25. The term used for menstrual cloth or garment in Isa 64:6 is only used here in the Hebrew Scriptures. Another Hebrew word in Lev 20:18 and Isa 30:22 has a wider semantic range including being “sick,” “faint,” or “stunned.” That phrase was translated “seated apart” in the Septuagint, which makes the separateness entailed by ritual impurity the salient part and does not connote dirtiness or depravity. See Dorothea Erbele-Küster, “Archaeological and Textual Evidence for Menstruation as Gendered Taboo in the Second Temple Period?” in *Gender and Social Norms in Ancient Israel, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity: Texts and Material Culture*, ed. Michaela Bauks, Katharina Galor, and Judith Hartenstein (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2019) 169–84.
26. The Hebrew adjective used for menstruating women in Lev 20:18 and Isa 30:22 is also used figuratively in Lam 1:13 (to describe the personified city of Jerusalem who has been sapped of her strength by God's judgment) and in Lam 5:17 (to describe the hearts of the people in the midst of hardship) and is usually translated, “sick,” “faint,” or “stunned.”



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