

**The Blessings of Progeny, the Uncleanness
of Childbirth, and the Paradox**

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“God further said to Abraham: ‘As for your wife Sarai, do not call her Sarai; her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her, and I will give you a son by her. Him also will I bless; he shall give rise to nations, and rulers of peoples shall issue from him.’” (Gn 17:15-16 *NAB*)

A major theme in the Pentateuch, especially in the stories of the Patriarchs in the Book of Genesis, is the selection of a favored family line which God blesses and perpetuates through the gift of offspring. The concepts of blessings and childbirth or progeny are associated on at least four separate occasions in Genesis alone (Gn 12:2; 17:16; 22:17; 28:3); therefore, this association would seem to be well accepted among the ancient Israelites. The same association is acknowledged by John L. McKenzie in his definition of bless/blessing:

“In the OT, Blessing is conceived as a communication of life from Yahweh... The effect of the blessing most frequently mentioned is fertility, whether in men, animals, or crops.”¹

There is no significant challenge to this hypothesis until the Leviticus 12 regarding the purity laws. Chapter 12 states:

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites: When a woman has conceived and gives birth to a boy, she shall be unclean for seven days, with the same uncleaness as at her menstrual period.’” (Lv 12:1-2 *NAB*)

And

“If she gives birth to a girl, for fourteen days she shall be as unclean as at her menstruation, after which she shall spend sixty-six days in becoming purified of her blood.” (Lv 12:5 *NAB*)

In contemporary western thought, the term “unclean” has definite negative connotations which beg the question, “Why would a woman, upon whom God had bestowed the blessings of children, and through whom God has manifested His plan to establish a holy nation, be considered unclean?”

¹ McKenzie, John L. *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1965), 98.

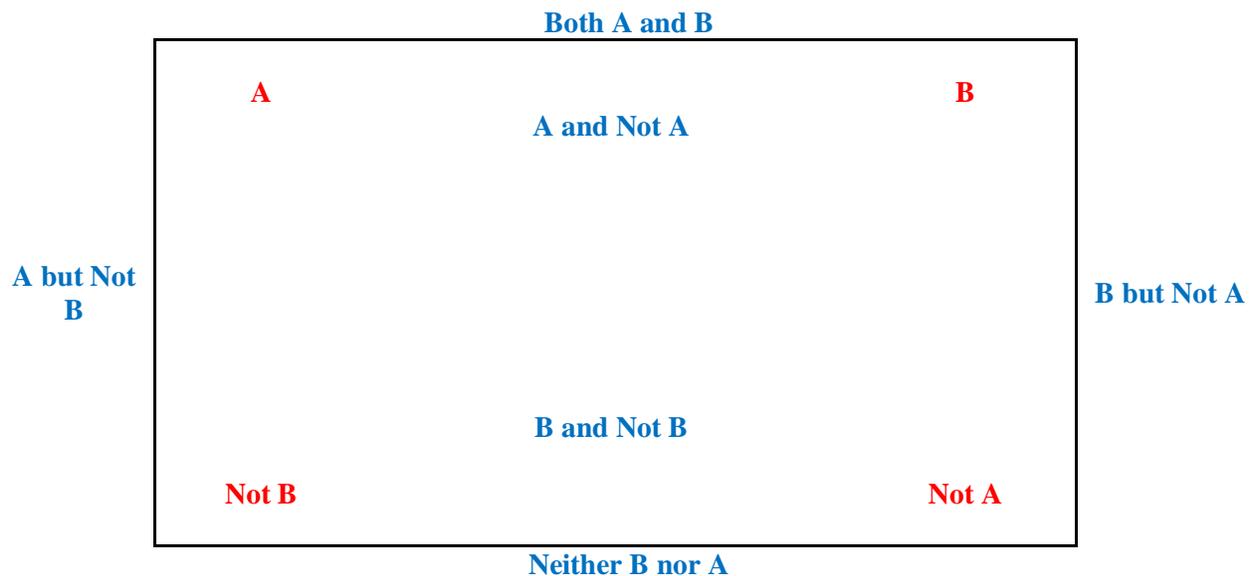
The purity laws transmitted through Leviticus 12 present an apparent paradox to the blessings of children already seen in Genesis, but despite the literal sense of the text viewed through modern western eyes, there is no actual paradox. I propose that the paradox exists only as far as our understanding of the term “unclean” is limited by our contemporary historical conditioning. The research presented here will attempt to demonstrate that the terms “blessing” and “unclean”, as understood by the authors of Leviticus, are actually related. If this demonstration is successful, the apparent paradox between Genesis and Leviticus will be eliminated.

Many other questions arise from the text of Leviticus 12. For example, “Why the difference between the birth of a male child and the birth of a female child?” I do not propose to answer this or any of the other questions; the research presented here will be limited to the question of uncleanness due to childbirth in Leviticus 12 and its relationship with childbirth as a blessing described in Genesis.

Method

Since the crux of this paper deals with the relationship between the terms “unclean” and “blessing”, and the differences between their historical meaning and our contemporary understanding, a semiotic analysis of these terms is well suited to the question at hand. This analysis will select several terms related to both sides of the paradox and analyze them using semiotic squares similar to those developed by A.J. Greimas and the Paris School of semiotics. This method has been slightly modified to suit the analysis. Namely, the squares will be developed according to the theories described by Louis Hébert in *Tools for Text and Image Analysis, An Introduction to Applied Semiotics* in which two opposing terms are selected, their contrary and sub-contrary terms are developed, and a series of metaterms, or synthetic terms

consisting of combinations of opposing terms and contraries, are developed to explore the relationship between the original term. The validity of the relationship between the terms is then tested by attempting to “lexicalize” the terms (assign labels or names to the terms which may actually exist in reality). The ability to name these synthetic terms is a measure of the validity of the relationship between the original terms. A generic semiotic square, where Term A and Term B are in opposition, might appear as follows:



Similar semiotic squares may then be applied to various metaterms in order establish further relationships between all the terms. This is a very limited application of the semiotic methods described by Hébert but one that will hopefully bear fruit by demonstrating that “blessing” and “unclean” are not in opposition to each other as the paradox would suggest.

Survey of Literature

Over the years Leviticus 12 has not received as much attention as other portions of the Pentateuch but it has not gone unnoticed. Much of the scholarship, especially in recent years, has concentrated on two different aspects of the text: 1) the source of uncleanness due to

childbirth and 2) the aforementioned differences between the increased time required for purification after the birth of a female child as opposed to birth of a male child. Regarding the former, the answer may seem obvious as it is implied by the text: “she shall be unclean for seven days, with the same uncleanness as at her menstrual period” (Lv 12:2 *NAB*), and “she shall spend sixty-six days in becoming purified of her blood.” (Lv 12:5 *NAB*) It is the association of blood flowing from the body due to childbirth that renders the woman unclean. Many scholars agree that the association of blood with life and death also resulted in an association between the creative and destructive powers of God; thus, blood was taboo. Some scholars have elaborated on the special nature blood played in childbirth. Citing Jacob Milgrom, Elaine Adler Goodfriend points out that “Vaginal blood had an even greater significance for some of the ancients, who thought it contained the seed that united with the male seed (semen) to produce a human being.”² Mary Douglas narrows the role blood by calling attention to the difference between blood loss from a living body, say from a nose bleed (which would not be considered impure) and blood flowing during childbirth or menstruation, the key difference being the implications of fertility³. Douglas also makes a historical-anthropological argument for the purification period as a period of much needed rest in an era of high mortality rates among mothers and children.⁴ While these sources do not specifically address the question at hand, they do provide valuable insight into the ancient concept of uncleanness associated with childbirth.

² Elaine Adler Goodfriend, "תזריה Tazria Leviticus 12:1-13:59: Purity, Birth, and Illness," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 637

³ Douglas, Mary, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 178

⁴ *Ibid.* 181

A number of other authors have turned to an anthropological explanation for the association of the blood of childbirth with uncleanness or some form of taboo. Maxine Miska⁵ describes a ceremony held among the Hakka-speaking people of Taiwan in which a bowl of wine, symbolic of the blood spilled during childbirth, is drunk by the family of a deceased mother in order to save her from eternal suffering in a pool of the same blood in the after life. These people hold that menstrual blood and the blood from childbirth is dirty and pollutes both the body and the earth so it must be dealt with appropriately. Miska observes that this blood is representative of the woman's fertility which, in a patriarchal society which values family and family loyalty above all, can threaten the stability of the family if children are more devoted to the mother than the father. This would seem to have little to do with the role of blood in the uncleanness described in Leviticus and even less to do with the specific question at hand but it demonstrates an interesting relationship between blood, fertility, and the deities (the ancestors in the case of the Hakka).

In their article, "Rachel's Tomb," Benjamin Cox and Susan Ackerman also turn to the discipline of anthropology to explain why Rachel, the favored wife of Jacob, was hastily buried in a roadside grave rather than in the family tomb after dying during the birth of Benjamin. They cite a number of examples from various cultural traditions which treat a woman dying during childbirth as taboo. Citing Mary Douglas, the authors point to the various forms of uncleanness associated with childbirth and the fact that the mother who dies during childbirth cannot be cleansed and reintegrated into society, a fact that can "unleash all sorts of other dangerous forces."⁶ Once again, this would seem to have little relation to the questions of childbirth,

⁵ Maxine Miska, "Drinking the Blood of Childbirth: The Reincorporation of the Dead in Hakka Funeral Ritual," in *Bodylore*, ed. Katherine Young (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993)

⁶ Benjamin D. Cox and Susan Ackerman, "Rachel's Tomb," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 1 (2009): 145

blessings, and uncleanness, but a strong relationship between uncleanness and the forces of life and death are demonstrated, a relationship which may prove useful if kept in mind during the semiotic analysis.

Theories abound regarding the longer purification period for the birth of a female child as opposed to a male child, but there seems to be no general consensus. Some suggest that the time periods may have been equal at one point but the period was eventually cut short in the case of male children in order to facilitate the child's circumcision on the eighth day after birth.⁷ Others suggest that the period of purification was extended to twice the period for female children since, on occasion, there can be a discharge from a newborn female which resembles menstrual flow; therefore, two females (mother and child) each with a flow of blood would necessitate twice the purification period.⁸ One article, published in 1933, even suggested the existence of toxicological differences in the blood discharged between the birth of a male and a female of which the ancients somehow gained awareness⁹. These sources proved interesting reading but provided little assistance in understanding the relationship between blessings and uncleanness.

Analysis of the Text

Before proceeding with the semiotic analysis, it is necessary to have a firm grasp of the literal sense of the text. This will help to identify the terms which will be used in the analysis as well as help to establish the diachronic working definition of these terms.

⁷ Goodfriend, 640

⁸ Jonathan Magonet, "'But If It Is a Girl, She Is Unclean for Twice Seven Days...': The Riddle of Leviticus 12:5," in *Reading Leviticus*, ed. John F.A. Sawyer (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pr, 1996), 152

⁹ David Israel Macht, "A Scientific Appreciation of Leviticus 12:1-5," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 52, no. 4 (1933): 260.

Leviticus 12 occurs approximately in the middle of the Book of Leviticus which is generally characterized as a legislative discourse regarding cultic worship. It is sometimes also referred to as “The Holiness Code.” The book is outlined as follows:

Chapters 1 through 7: Ritual of Sacrifice
 Chapters 8 through 10: Ceremony of Ordination
 Chapters 11 through 16: Laws regarding Legal Purity
 Chapters 17 through 26: Code of Legal Holiness
 Chapter 27: Redemption of Offerings

From the perspective of reader response criticism, there are three levels of dialogue present or implied in this text. On the literal level, God is speaking to Moses. God is the implied author and Moses is the implied reader since almost the entire chapter (Verses 2-8) appears as a direct quotation from God. However, in Verse 2, God commands Moses, “Tell the Israelites...” which implies an additional level of dialogue subject to the literal level. Assuming that Moses does as he is commanded, he becomes the implied author and the Israelites the ideal readers. This level seems to be *implied* since nowhere in the Book of Leviticus does it explicitly mention Moses actually relaying the laws of Chapter 12 to the people as is the case in some of the other chapters. Finally, there is a third level of dialogue above and beyond the first two. Chapter 12 is narrated in the third person. It is the narrator who recounts the conversation between God and Moses but his role is limited to Verse 1, “The Lord said to Moses...,” which is insufficient to determine if he is omniscient. This seems irrelevant since one could easily imagine Moses recounting this story to the actual author/narrator. At this third level, more information about the actual author is needed to determine the identity of the ideal reader. It is widely accepted that Leviticus originated from the Priestly (P) source which is classically dated to around the time of the Babylonian Exile; Gottwald gives the dates c550-450 BCE¹⁰ while others, namely Joseph

¹⁰ Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 139

Blenkinsopp, give slightly earlier dates (c587-515 BCE)¹¹. Blenkinsopp also suggests that the P source was interested in providing a paradigm for the religious practices of those returning to Jerusalem from the exile¹². Ronald Faley¹³ and Jacob Milgrom¹⁴ agree, in essence, that Leviticus was primarily written to address to the priests of the Second Temple Period to instruct them on matters of cultic practices. Thus, the P author, possibly in exile, is the actual author and the priests who had returned to Jerusalem to re-establish and perpetuate the cult during the Second Temple Period are the ideal readers.

Leviticus 12 is an example of apodictic law, as opposed to casuistic law, which is marked by the proclasis (if) and apodosis (then) structure which is more visible in the original Masoretic text (in Lv 12:2 - *כִּי תִזְרֶיעַ* - where the conjunction *כִּי* could be translated as a conditional clause “if she is producing seed” and in Lv 12:5 with the introduction of a conditional clause using *וְאִם* – “and if”). This agrees with John L. McKenzie’s observation that most moral and cultic laws are apodictic.¹⁵

The purity laws of Chapter 12 are closely related to others found in Leviticus including those in Chapter 15 regarding personal uncleanness and Chapter 17 regarding the sacredness of blood. Specifically, Lv 12:2 states, “...she shall be unclean for seven days, with the same uncleanness as at her menstrual period.” The uncleanness associated with menstruation is discussed in the personal cleanliness laws of Chapter 15. Lv 12:4, “... and she shall spend thirty-three days more in becoming purified of her blood...,” is further elaborated in Chapter 17:

¹¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch, An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 238

¹² Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 2 (2009), 225

¹³ Ronald J. Faley, “Leviticus,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown et al. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1990), 4:3

¹⁴ Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991)

¹⁵ McKenzie, 498

“Since the life of a living body is in its blood, I have made you put it on the altar, so that atonement may thereby be made for your own lives, because it is the blood, as the seat of life, that makes atonement.” (Lv 17:11 *NAB*)

This relationship between the flow of blood and childbirth will become very significant in addressing the problem at hand. The word “blood” (דָּם) appears twice more in Chapter 12 (Verses 5 & 7).

Milgrom also notes several other interesting facts regarding the placement of Chapter 12 within the book: the human purity laws occur after the animal purity laws, paralleling the order of creation found in Genesis, and the various personal impurities are dealt with in order of decreasing severity based on the length of purification required (childbirth being the most severe)¹⁶.

Chiasm, parallelisms, and other significant literary devices which might focus attention on particular terms or concepts in the text appear to be absent from Leviticus 12; however, a number of terms are repeated throughout the chapter (unclean/clean, menstrual/menstruation, blood, purified, and atone/atonement). The appearance of the term “blood” three times in the chapter may not seem significant compared to other chapters (Lv 4 - fourteen times, Lv 17 - ten times). Likewise, “purified” appears only twice while it is used in eight times in Lv 14. “Menstrual/menstruation” appears twice in Lv 12 but seven times in Lv 15, and “clean/unclean” appears four times in Lv 12 which pales in comparison to the remainder of the book. A similar statement can be made about the terms “atone/atonement.” Based on the data, these terms would appear to be insignificant in Lv 12; however, an analysis of term-count to verse-count ratio produces different results. Lv 12 has 8 verses while Lv 4 and Lv 17 have 35 and 16 verses, respectively. Therefore, the ratios for the term “blood” in these three chapters are 3:8, 14:35, and

¹⁶ Milgrom, 743

10:16, respectively. This would put the term at least on equal footing with similar chapters in the legal purity section but still significantly lower than Lv 17, which is to be expected since Chapter 17 deals specifically with blood. When the ratios of the other terms are similarly analyzed, they appear in substantially equal ratios. Furthermore, these term ratios for Lv 12, as compared to all other books in the Bible, appear¹⁷ to be substantially higher. Based on this, it can be concluded that these terms are significant in Lv 12 and are good candidates for the semiotic analysis.

The existence of oppositions or polarities may also help focus attention on particular terms or concepts within the text. The term count above supports the identification of the opposing terms “clean” and “unclean” as significant in this chapter and, as these terms are directly related to the question at hand, they will be used for the analysis. The term “birth” is used twice but its opposite (death) is overtly absent. However, the term “blood” appears in a significant ratio and, as previously quoted from Lv 17:11, blood is life, and the flow of blood from the body (from menstruation or childbirth) is analogous to death.¹⁸ So while the opposing *term* “death” is not present, certainly the opposing *concept* is present. These terms are also closely related to the original problem and will be used in the analysis. The terms “atone/atonement” offer several interesting challenges; specifically, what has the poor woman done that she should have to make atonement? This question may be answered indirectly by the final analysis but since it is not directly related to the original concern, and it may be require a stretch of the imagination to find the opposing terms or concepts within the text, they will be excluded from the analysis.

¹⁷ “appear” - this final ratio comparison is based on a qualitative analysis rather than a quantitative analysis.

¹⁸ Goodfriend, 637

It would be helpful at this point to restate the thesis and summarize. The Book of Genesis portrays childbirth as a manifestation of God's blessings while the Book of Leviticus would seem to reverse this notion through the assignment of impurity to the woman giving birth. The corpus of literature on Lv 12 addresses various aspects of this impurity but not the apparent paradox it presents in light of Genesis. An analysis of the text of Lv 12 identified two significant sets of opposing terms which will be useful in the semiotic analysis. These terms are birth/death and clean/unclean. All that remains is to identify similar terms regarding childbirth as a blessing.

The terms "bless/blessing" are an obvious choice considering their relation to progeny mentioned earlier. Gn 17:15-16 provides an excellent example:

"God further said to Abraham: 'As for your wife Sarai, do not call her Sarai; her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her, and I will give you a son by her. Him also will I bless; he shall give rise to nations, and rulers of peoples shall issue from him.'" (Gn 17:15-16 NAB)

It is significant that these two verses are attributed to the P source¹⁹ since it helps to establish an association between the terms for progeny and those for the blessings of God which is not exclusive to the Yahwist (J) or Elohist (E) sources. This association does appear more frequently in verses attributed to J and E which may indicate a stronger association of the concepts in these sources but this question lies outside the scope of the current project.

Semiotic Analysis

With the selection of terms complete, the semiotic squares can be constructed in order to determine the existence of relationships between any of the terms or concepts. The relationship between "birth" and "blessing" seems intuitive, both from diachronic and contemporary perspectives; therefore, this relationship will be reserved for last and only examined if need be.

¹⁹ Richard J. Clifford and Roland E. Murphy, "Genesis," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown et al. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1990), 2:26

The primary concern lies in the relationship between “birth” and “unclean”; thus, “unclean” will be examined first. A semantic approach²⁰ will be used to explore the terms. This approach begins with the basic term and applies the semiotic square analysis successively to terms and metaterms identified in the previous square. In applying this method, Hébert points out:

“In textual analysis, one cannot be bound by lexical labels. For example, an element may fall under the class ‘death’ without actually appearing as the word ‘death’. ‘Deceased’, ‘last journey’ and similar expression will do just as well.”²¹

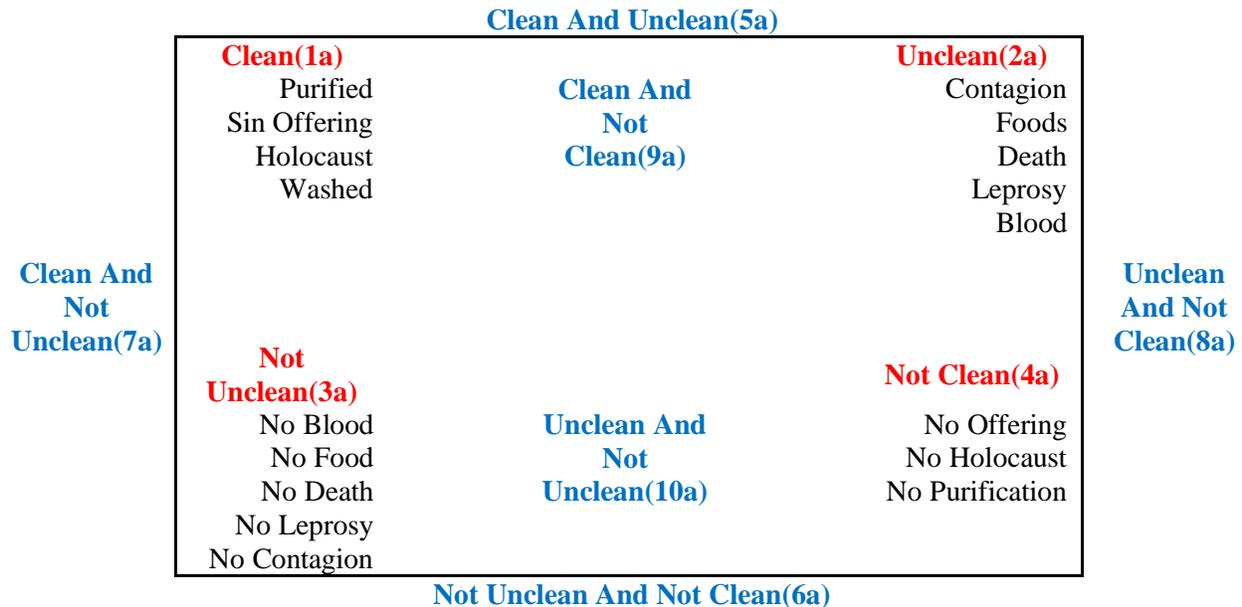
Application of this principle has already been seen as a useful tool in the identification of “death” as an opposing term to “birth” in the text of Lv 12. For this reason, an exercise in word association is useful in constructing the squares. The following table contains the terms of interest, their opposing terms, and terms and concepts related to each which are taken from the text or related texts.

	Bless	Birth	Clean
Terms	To be blessed	To give birth	One who has offered holocaust
	To receive life	To be fruitful	One who has offered a sin offering
	To be fertile	To fulfill the great commandment (Gn 1:28)	One completing period of purification
	To be fecund	To be an instrument of God’s gift of life	One who has bathed
	To be favored		One who has washed his/her clothes
	Not Bless	Not Birth	Not Clean
Opposing Terms	Cursed	No life	Contagion
	Sterile	Non-existence	One who ate selected foods
	Not favored		One who touched a dead body
	Barren		A leper
	Painful child birth		A woman with a flow of blood
			A man with a flow of fluid

²⁰ Louis Hébert, *Tools for Text and Image Analysis, An Introduction to Applied Semiotics* (2005), 33, <http://www.signosemio.com/documents/Louis-Hebert-Tools-for-Texts-and-Images.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2010)

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33

Thus, the first semiotic square could be constructed as follows:



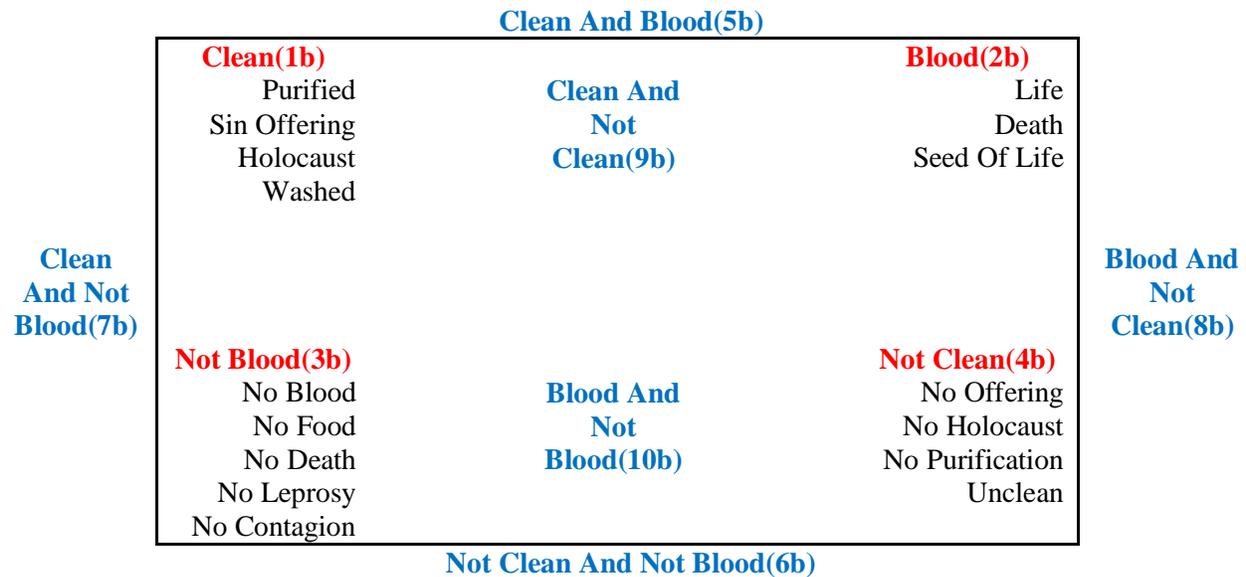
The terms and concepts related to the primary terms (1a – 4a) are included underneath them in order to illustrate more clearly the analogous thought process and the movements between the terms. Examining the homogeneity of the square, Terms 5a, 6a, 9a and 10a violate the law of non-contradiction and do not exist in reality. Terms 7a and 8a, which do not suffer the same fate as the others, may be lexicalized and are therefore of interest. Term 7a (Clean and Not Unclean) may be thought of as a person who has not been rendered unclean due to any of the causes mentioned in Leviticus but, had he been made unclean, he would follow the prescriptions for restoration of cleanness. One might even imagine a scrupulous person who follows the same prescriptions without having been rendered unclean “just in case”. Although the term is used anachronistically, this term might be labeled “Pharisee.” Term 8a (Unclean and Not Clean) describes the person who has been already rendered unclean but who does not follow the prescriptions of the law for their restoration. If the case of uncleanness involved blood, he is not

only a person who has transgressed the law but he also has not upheld the covenant which God made with Noah and every living creature after the flood:

“Every creature that is alive shall be yours to eat; I give them all to you as I did the green plants. Only flesh with its lifeblood still in it you shall not eat. For your own lifeblood, too, I will demand an accounting: from every animal I will demand it, and from man in regard to his fellow man I will demand an accounting for human life.” (Gn 9:3-5 *NAB*)

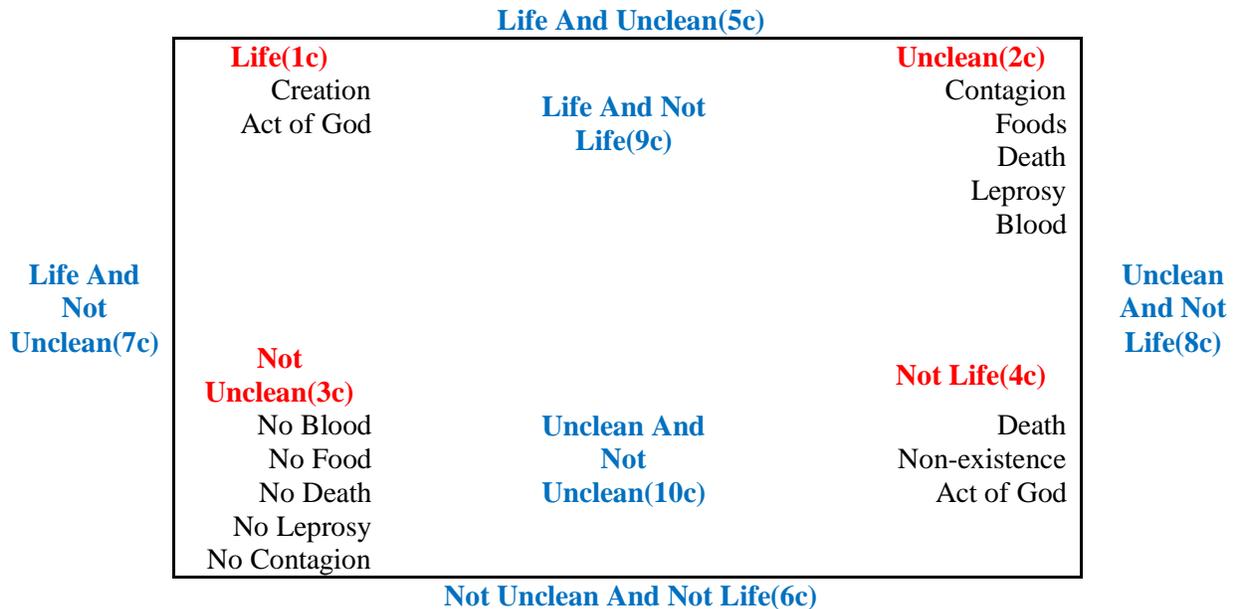
The relationship between blood and uncleanness is well established in the text of Lv 12:5:

“...she shall be as unclean as at her menstruation, after which she shall spend sixty-six days in becoming purified of her blood.” Based on this discussion, it is not unreasonable to treat “clean” and “blood” as opposing terms. A semiotic square using these terms could be constructed as follows:



Again, Terms 9b and 10b violate the law of non-contradiction but more can be said of the other metaterms. Term 5b (Clean and Blood) describes a situation discussed by Douglas which was previously mentioned on Page 3. It is possible to have a flow of blood from a living body and not contract uncleanness (a nose bleed or a simple cut). It is only blood associated with reproductive functions and the improperly handled blood of a dead body that causes uncleanness.

For the sake of simplicity, Term 5b can be labeled “the clumsy person” who experiences many nose bleeds and minor cuts. Likewise, Term 6b (Not Clean and Not Blood) is a real term describing someone who is unclean due to circumstance other than those caused by blood. This term could be labeled “a leper”, “a grave-digger”, or “a lover of bacon” since each of these persons would be considered unclean for reasons other than contact with blood. Term 7b (Clean and Not Blood) describes a situation similar to Term 7a and might also be labeled “Pharisee” although reinforcement of the term “clean” in Term 7b is not as strong as it is in Term 7a. Term 8b (Blood and Not Clean) describes the person who has contracted uncleanness through contact with the blood of childbirth, menstruation, or the blood of a dead body, who has not completed the prescribed cleansing. This term is of particular interest since it associates the concepts “life” and “death” with the opposing term “unclean”. This association bears further examination in the following square:



As expected, Terms 9c and 10c are self-contradictory and warrant no further discussion. Term 7c (Life and Not Unclean) might describe the law abiding person who is not unclean for any

reason and who enjoys a share of God's gift of life. This person might also be labeled "Blessed". Term 8c (Unclean and Not Life) also exists in reality as and might be labeled "Corpse". Term 6c (Not Clean and Not Life) is interesting in that it would appear to be non-existent given what is already known about uncleanness, but there does exist a situation in which a dead body was considered clean – the sacrificial offering. Nowhere in Leviticus is it mentioned that the priest becomes unclean through the blood or the dead body of a sacrificial animal. It may be concluded that through the prescribed handling of these items, the priest avoids uncleanness. Therefore, "Sacrifice" is an appropriate label for Term 6b. Looking back at Term 5b (Clean and Blood), a similar observation may be made. This leaves us with the final, and perhaps most significant metaterm, Term 5c (Life and Unclean). The combination of the terms "Life" and "Unclean" reflect the situation of primary interest, the woman who has given birth to a child. Also in this term we see the combination of concepts such as "Creation" and "Act of God" with "Unclean".

An association between God and that which is unclean seems counter intuitive to the contemporary reader just as the association between childbirth and uncleanness seems counter intuitive given what is known about blessings and childbirth from Genesis. Therefore, this association of terms lies at the heart of the paradox which can only be resolved by reassignment of meaning to one or both of the terms. Redefining of our concept of God is possible but unreasonable. One could think of "an unclean god", perhaps some malicious or hideous god from ancient mythology like Medusa, but to think of the God of Abraham in such terms, even in an academic exercise, is sacrilegious. This leaves only one possibility: to redefine the concept of unclean.

Before seeking the understanding of "unclean" as it is used in Leviticus any further, an examination of the term from a contemporary perspective would be helpful. The antonym of

“unclean” is simply “clean” and some common synonyms might be “dirty”, “defiled”, “tainted”, “polluted”, or “contaminated.” Each of these synonyms is generally used in the modern vocabulary in a negative way; we speak of “air pollution”, “tainted food”, and “contaminated water”. From a certain perspective, they represent chaos imposed on an otherwise orderly system which idealizes “fresh air”, “pure food”, and “clean water.” Ricoeur described this chaos as “evil.”²² The concept of “unclean” that we are seeking seems to be the exact opposite of this chaotic, evil uncleanness since the things that pertain to God, such as the act of creation and life itself, can be associated with uncleanness.

In *Leviticus as Literature*, Mary Douglas offers the analogy of Mount Sinai from Ex 19 which reinforces a concept of “unclean” which is opposed to the concept of unclean as evil. When God descended upon Sinai in the dense cloud to deliver the law to Moses, only Moses was permitted to ascend to the top of the mountain and enter the cloud. The people, and even the animals, had to remain below, not even touching the base of the mountain or they would have died. Later, the priest and elders were permitted to climb up to an intermediate point on the mountain. Douglas uses these facts to formulate an understanding of uncleanness. Mount Sinai represents what is unclean and cannot be touched; it is unclean not because it is polluted or contaminate but because God has descended upon it. Likewise, the people are not permitted to touch it not because of pollution or contamination but out of respect for the holiness of God, a respect that we could call “the fear of God”. This separation of the holy from the mundane, the sacred from the profane, is the key to understanding the use of “unclean” in Lv 12. For a Jewish layperson, to handle the sacred or the holy was to insult the holiness of God, a condition which P

²² Anne Johnson Wrider, “Water, Fire, Blood: Defilement and Purification from a Ricoeurian Perspective,” *Anglican Theological Review* 67, no. 2 (1985), 138

labels “unclean”. If an individual were to become “unclean” atonement had to be made according to the law in order to restore the proper relationship with God.

This analogy confirms the association of God with uncleanness seen in Term 5c of the third semiotic square. Taking this one step further, it can be said that childbirth, or even menstruation which is a function integral to procreation, involves life and blood which are both items belonging to God and are to be considered sacred or holy. For a woman to experience these events was seen as an encroachment upon God’s holiness which required purification, atonement, and sin offerings in order to re-establish the ordered relationship between the woman and God.

Conclusions

The blessings of childbirth described in the Book of Genesis seem to be negated by the assignment of uncleanness to the woman giving birth to a child in the Book of Leviticus. This paradox exists only due to our contemporary, secular understanding of the term “unclean” as a negative term synonymous with “dirty”, “contaminated”, or “polluted.” As used in Leviticus, this term is better understood as “holy” or “sacred”. This new definition of “unclean”, combined with a strong tradition of maintaining separation between the sacred and profane, or the unclean and clean, respectively, explains the paradoxical treatment of childbirth in Leviticus. The act of giving birth involves the creation of a new life, an act attributable to God, as well as the flow of blood from a living body, specifically, the flow of blood associated with fertility. Blood was synonymous with life for the authors of Leviticus, a fact that made this blood a source of uncleanness. Therefore, childbirth *can* be viewed as a blessing from God *and* a source of uncleanness. The participation in the creation of new life, along with the associated blood,

represented an encroachment upon God's holiness which required the woman to make atonement, a sin offering, and purify herself in order to restore her relationship with God.

The thesis statement has withstood the application of the semiotic analysis in order to establish an understanding of uncleanness closer to that held by the authors of Leviticus. The semiotic squares proved very useful in exploring the relationship between various terms presented by the text and contained in related texts in order to arrive at this diachronic understanding of uncleanness.

Several questions arose during the analysis, some which were answered, at least in part, and some which remain open. A question arose regarding the more frequent appearance of an association between childbirth and blessings in J and E passages as compared to P passages. The validation of the thesis statement appears to eliminate the possibility that the P authors did not view childbirth as a blessing but more research would be needed to fully explore this question. In addition, it was noted that a large amount of scholarship has been devoted to questions regarding the differences between the purification requirements following the birth of a male and a female child. While these are intriguing questions, they were not directly addressed here since this paper addressed uncleanness due to childbirth in general, regardless of the sex of the child. However, the conclusions may offer an indirect response to the question which is related to a woman's fertility, fertility that is inherently "unclean" because of its relation to the act of creation. It might be suppose that the purification period is doubled since a female child increases the presence of fertility twofold but more research would be required to support this theory.

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Appendix A

Note: This appendix contains notes taken while analyzing the text of Leviticus 12. They are included as a demonstration of the thought process and research skills that I used in this analysis. These notes are not presented in a scholarly format, nor were they intended to be, so sources are not annotated in Turabian format.

The Literal Sense of the Text

1. **What is the overall structure of the periscope?**

Leviticus 12 occurs approximately in the middle of the Book of Leviticus. The Book of Leviticus is generally characterized as a legislative discourse regarding cultic worship. It is sometimes also referred to as “The Holiness Code.” The Oxford Catholic Study Bible outlines the Book of Leviticus as follows:

- I. Ritual of Sacrifice (1-7)
- II. Ceremony of Ordination (8-10)
- III. Laws regarding Legal Purity (11-16)
- IV. Code of Legal Holiness (17-26)
- V. Redemption of Offerings (27)

Thus, Chapter 12 occurs in the section regarding legal purity.

There are multiple levels of communication in this text. In what I would consider the literal level of communication, God is speaking to Moses. God is the sender and Moses is the receiver. However, in Verse 2, God commands Moses, “Tell the Israelites...” so, presumably, there is an additional level of communication subject to this literal level. Moses will tell the Israelites what God has commanded; therefore, Moses is the sender and the Israelites are the receivers. However, this level seems to be implied since

nowhere in the Book of Leviticus does it explicitly mention Moses relaying this specific law (Chapter 12) to the people. This level of communication is made clear in other chapters. For example, Chapter 7, regarding guilt offerings, concludes with:

“This is the ritual for holocausts, cereal offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, (ordination offerings) and peace offerings, which the LORD enjoined on Moses at Mount Sinai at the time when he commanded the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai to bring their offerings to the LORD.” (Lv 7:37-38 NAB)

Finally, there is a third level of communication above the literal level. In Chapter 12, as elsewhere in Leviticus, it is a third person narrator recounting the conversation between God and Moses. Almost the entire chapter (vss. 2-8) appears as a direct quotation from God (marked by the particle לְאֵמֹר at the end of Verse 1). The narrator’s remarks are limited to Verse 1, “The Lord said to Moses...”; the role of the narrator here is insufficient to determine if he is omniscient but this seems irrelevant. One could easily imagine Moses recounting this story to the author/narrator. At this level of communication, more information about the author is needed to understand who is giving the communication and who is receiving. It is widely accepted that Leviticus originated from the Priestly source which is classically dated to around the time of the Babylonian Exile; Gottwald gives the dates c550-450 BCE while others (Blenkinsopp) give slightly earlier dates (c587-515 BCE) which are still encompassed by the exilic period. Blenkinsopp suggests that the Priestly source was interested in providing a paradigm for the religious practices of those returning to Jerusalem from the exile. Faley (New Jerome Commentary) and Milgrom (New Anchor Bible) agree in essence that Leviticus was primarily addressed to the priests of the Second Temple Period to instruct them on matters of cult. At this level, the communicator is the priestly writer (probably in exile)

addressing the priests who would (or already have) returned to Jerusalem to re-establish or perpetuate the cult during the Second Temple Period.

How would you classify this text?

Chapter 12 is obviously law, but what kind of law? According to McKenzie, who quotes Alt, there are primarily casuistic laws and apodictic laws. McKenzie states that moral and cultic laws are generally apodictic whereas criminal laws tend to be casuistic. Even though Chapter 12 does not take on the classic apodictic form (if this... then that...), I would agree that it represents an apodictic law formula. This also seems to be supported by the MT in 12:2:

כִּי תִזְרֶינָהּ (where כִּי could be translated as a conditional “if she is producing seed”)

It is seen more clearly in Verse 5 where the protasis is clearly marked by וְאִם.

This law regarding purity and childbirth falls within the section of laws dealing with legal purity. These other laws include:

Ch 11: Dietary cleanliness

Ch 13-14: Leprosy

Ch 15: Personal Uncleaness

Ch 16: The Day of Atonement (one of my favorite laws: sending a scapegoat into the desert sounds much easier than going to confession sometimes)

Chapter 12 is closely related to Chapter 15 which is referenced in Verse 2: “...she shall be unclean for seven days, with the same uncleaness as at her menstrual period.” The uncleaness associated with menstruation is discussed in the personal cleanliness laws of Chapter 15.

Verse 4 relates Chapter 12 to Chapter 17 which addresses the sacredness of blood: "... and she shall spend thirty-three days more in becoming purified of her blood..." The word "blood" (דָּם) appears twice more in Chapter 12 (vss. 5 & 7). **The relationship between childbirth and the presence of blood is very significant in addressing the thesis statement.** Regarding Chapter 17, Verse 11 appears to be the most significant for the thesis:

"Since the life of a living body is in its blood, I have made you put it on the altar, so that atonement may thereby be made for your own lives, because it is the blood, as the seat of life, that makes atonement."

Milgrom notes that human purity laws occur after animal purity laws, paralleling the order of creation in Gn. Further, the various impurities occur in order of decreasing severity based on the length of purification required.

2. What literary devices are used in the text?

There appears to be no significant literary (chiasm, parallelisms, etc..) devices used in Chapter 12 neither in the MT, LXX, or NAB. There are a number of words repeated throughout the chapter. The significant repeated terms are: unclean/clean, menstrual/menstruation, blood, purified, and atone/atonement. I referenced Nelson's Complete Concordance of the New American Bible (Fr. Stephen J. Hartdegen, OFM, LSS editor, New York, Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers, 1977) regarding these terms.

"Blood" appears in Ch. 12 three times which does not seem significant compared to other chapters (Ch. 4 - fourteen times, Ch. 17 - ten times, other chapters about the same as Ch.12). "Purified" appears twice in Ch 12, once in Ch 15, and eight times in Ch 14.

"Menstrual/menstruation" appears twice in Ch 12 and seven times in Ch 15.

"Clean/unclean" appears four times in Ch. 12 which pales in comparison to the rest of the

Book and a similar statement can be made about the terms “atone/atonement”. Based on these data, the terms would appear to be insignificant. I also looked at the term-count to verse-count ratio: Chapter 12 only has 8 verses while Chapter 4 and 17 have 35 and 16 verses, respectively. Therefore, the ratios for the term “Blood” in these three chapters are 3:8, 14:35, and 10:16, respectively. This would at least put the term on equal footing with similar chapters in the legal purity section but still significantly lower than Chapter 17, which is to be expected since it deals specifically with blood. When the ratios of the other terms are similarly analyzed, they appear in substantially equal ratios. Looking at the ratios of the three sets of terms (blood, purified, menstrual) as they appear in Lv as compared to other books of the Bible, their ratios in Lv appear to be substantially higher (I specifically used the word “appear” since I did not actually calculate the ratios, this is based on a visual estimation of the terms as they were listed in the concordance). From this, I can conclude that these terms are significant for this chapter.

3. Metaphors, similes, oppositions, polarities?

I decided to do a similar counting analysis for the remaining terms that I will use in the semiotic squares (blessing/curse, and birth/death) but a premise of my research is that these terms are implied by the passage; therefore, they do not lend themselves to the analysis. This leads to the next question: are there oppositions or polarities in the text and, if so, what are the most salient ones? The term count above supports the identification of the opposing terms “clean” and “unclean” as significant in this chapter. The term “birth” is used twice but its opposite (death?) is overtly absent. However, the term “blood” appears in a significant ratio and, as previously quoted from Lv 17:11, blood is life, and the flow of blood from the body (i.e. menstruation or childbirth) is

analogous to death. So while the opposing *term* “death” is not present, certainly the opposing *concept* is present.

What about the term “atonement”? McKenzie, P. 69 – atonement “theologically it includes the ideas of expiation for sin and reconciliation of man with God.” From Hebrew כפר – to cover, conceal the offending object so as to remove obstacle to reconciliation. “... to make an act of atonement, which is accomplished by the application of the blood of the victim (cf SACRIFICE). The priest makes an act of atonement for himself or for another or for all Israel, or he makes an act of atonement for sin or guilt. This is the first step in reconciliation and Yahweh Himself takes the second...” Lv 12:7-8 specify the sacrifices to be made for the atonement of the woman which implies that she has committed sin or incurred guilt through childbirth. Assuming that the child was conceived within a legal marriage etc... where does the sin or guilt come from? The following argument might be made: atonement implies the concepts of sin and guilt associated with childbirth even if no marital or sexual laws were broken during conception – however, the experience of childbirth, as known to the P authors, can be traced back to Gn 3:16. As a result of her sin, Eve was to experience the “pangs” of childbirth. “... in pain shall you bring forth children” but this is again attributed to J, not to P (NJBC). In addition, blood is not mention in MT, LXX, or NAB. Is it too far to stretch to assume that there would not have been the flow of blood during childbirth had Eve not sinned? Looked in *JPS* and *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*, neither of which support or refute this hypothesis. In the latter, one rabbi compared the “pain of childbirth” to miscarriage which might support this theory. This strays too far from the topic...

Atonement implies sin or guilt; is the opposite (righteousness) also implied? Abraham was considered righteous because of faith. “Righteousness” occurs only once in the Torah (Gn 15:6). There is not a clear relationship between observance of the law and righteousness which would appear later in the Pharisaical tradition. However, in Ex 19, God promises blessings to those keeping His covenant. “You shall be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” (Ex 19:6 *NAB*) – a nation that can rightly offer sacrifice. Perhaps this is the concept in opposition to atonement – priestly, holy. One who has been defiled by blood cannot participate in cultic ritual – cannot offer sacrifice – the one in need of atonement. This is in opposition to the one who follows the prescriptions for purification and is thus able to participate.

Note: The terms blessing/curse do not appear in Lv: 12 nor do I think one can imply the concept of blessing from the term “birth” as it is used here. For this reason, I have to go outside the periscope to obtain these terms for the analysis. Gn 12:1-4 is Abram’s call and blessing which would seem a good choice but NJBC attributes it to J. Likewise Gn 15:1-6. Gn 22:15-18 is E. Gn 17:1-27 IS attributed to P and specifically includes the blessing of children (vv 15-16). This is sufficient for my argument but a side question might be, “Did P associate progeny with the blessings of God as strongly as J or E?”

4. How does the HCM background help interpret the text? Does this confirm or deny ideas about theme of the text?

It makes sense that this is a P source which was written much later than the J and E sources of Ex 19-24, of which the Book of Lv is considered an extension. I find it interesting that that are some anachronisms in Lv which support the later dating such as

the requirement to keep the fire on the altar constantly burning (Lv 6:6) – where did they get all the wood? They were in the desert! This supports the idea that Lv refers to the cult of the Second Temple Period rather than the wilderness sanctuary. The time difference between J, E, and P may also help explain why childbirth and blessings seem so closely associated in Gn but later on in Lv there seems to be an *apparent* reversal.

My interpretation:

Counter-intuitive to a contemporary understanding, unclean=holy= (things of God) and these things must be kept separate from the things of man in order to show fear of God. Thus, while we might think that Lv and the P source *reverse* the idea that birth=blessing, it really doesn't. Birth=creation= (things of God) as well as birth=blood=life= (things of God), therefore, birth can still be viewed as a blessing but must be ritually treated so as to show fear of God.