

Dr. David deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament

Session 7, Purity and Pollution

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 7, Purity and Pollution, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. David deSilva's lecture on the Cultural World of the New Testament explores the significance of purity and pollution in ancient Israelite and Second Temple Judaism. He argues that understanding these ancient concepts is crucial for interpreting the New Testament, demonstrating how purity codes extended beyond merely physical cleanliness to encompass social structures, religious practices, and even time and space. DeSilva uses modern examples like handling dirt and food to illustrate the visceral reactions to defilement present then and now, highlighting how these ancient concerns impacted social interactions and religious life. The lecture also examines the different levels of purity concerns within Jewish society, from the laity to priests and the high priest, and discusses how these purity codes functioned to maintain Jewish identity and reinforce social boundaries. Finally, it explores various interpretations of these purity laws throughout different Jewish sects and periods.

2. 12 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. deSilva, Cultural World of the NT, Session 7 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → Introduction → The Cultural World of the NT).



**DeSilva_CultureNT_
Session07.mp3**

3. Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 7, Purity and Pollution

Purity and Pollution in the New Testament World

Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. Why do many modern Christians find the book of Leviticus difficult to understand?
2. How does deSilva use the analogy of dirt to explain ancient purity codes?
3. Explain the difference between the concepts of "clean" and "holy."
4. What is the significance of circumcision in the Jewish purity map?
5. How does the layout of the Second Temple reflect Jewish purity concerns?
6. What are two examples of "maps of time" in ancient Judaism?
7. Describe two ways in which Jewish dietary laws reinforced social boundaries.
8. What is the connection between the individual body and the social body in ancient Jewish purity beliefs?
9. How did some Second Temple Jews reinterpret dietary laws to emphasize moral principles?
10. What are two examples of pollutions for which there was no purification ritual in ancient Israel?

Answer Key

1. Many modern Christians find Leviticus challenging because they've been taught to view Old Testament purity laws as outdated, legalistic, and irrelevant to true faith. Protestant traditions, especially, emphasize direct access to God without ritual intermediaries, making it harder to grasp the ancient emphasis on purity for approaching the divine.
2. DeSilva uses the analogy of dirt to demonstrate how even modern people have unspoken purity codes. We react viscerally to dirt out of place, like on a living room carpet, much as ancient Israelites reacted to things considered ritually

impure. It highlights the intuitive sense of order and boundaries that underlies purity concerns.

3. "Clean" refers to a person or thing in its normal, proper state, while "holy" designates something set apart and belonging to God. Cleanness is the default, while holiness denotes a higher level of sacredness and separation from the ordinary.
4. Circumcision serves as a physical marker of the covenant between God and the Israelites, setting them apart from other nations. It inscribes on the body the specialness and chosenness of the Jewish people, signifying their inclusion in God's covenant and their obligation to maintain holiness.
5. The Second Temple's architecture reflected a hierarchy of holiness, with progressively restricted areas for Gentiles, Jewish women, Jewish men, priests, and finally the High Priest, who alone could enter the Holy of Holies. This spatial arrangement mirrored the graded levels of purity and access to God within the Jewish community.
6. Two examples are the Sabbath, a weekly observance of rest that sets apart the seventh day as holy, and the annual pilgrimage festivals like Passover, Pentecost, and Sukkot, which mark sacred times within the year and require specific observances. These temporal boundaries reinforce the rhythm of holiness in Jewish life.
7. First, the specific requirements for slaughtering and preparing meat meant that Jews had to establish their own markets, fostering close-knit communities in the diaspora. Second, by forbidding the consumption of food sacrificed to idols or prepared by non-Jews, the dietary laws discouraged social interactions that might lead to religious compromise or assimilation.
8. The integrity and boundaries of the individual body become a microcosm of the social body. Concerns about bodily fluids, skin conditions, and death reflect anxieties about maintaining the purity and distinctiveness of the Jewish community as a whole. Protecting the individual body symbolizes protecting the collective identity.
9. The Letter of Aristeas interprets dietary prohibitions as symbolic of moral virtues. Avoiding certain animals represents rejecting the vices associated with them. 4 Maccabees views adherence to dietary laws as training in self-control,

strengthening the individual's ability to resist temptation and make ethical choices.

10. Two examples are intentional violations of the Sabbath and participation in idolatry. These acts represented such severe transgressions against God's covenant that they were considered irreparable through ritual means and often carried the penalty of death.

Essay Questions

1. Analyze the social and religious functions of purity and pollution beliefs in ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism. How did these concepts shape individual behavior, communal identity, and relationships with God?
2. Compare and contrast the modern Western understanding of hygiene and the ancient Jewish concept of ritual purity. What are the similarities and differences in their motivations, practices, and social implications?
3. Explore how the concept of "holiness" is developed in Leviticus. What are the attributes of holiness? How is it expressed spatially, temporally, and in human behavior?
4. Discuss the various "purity maps" described by deSilva. How do these maps interact and reinforce each other in shaping Jewish identity and religious practice?
5. Consider how Second Temple Jewish texts like the Letter of Aristeas and 4 Maccabees reinterpreted traditional purity laws. What do these reinterpretations reveal about the evolving understanding of purity and its relationship to morality and ethics within Judaism?

Glossary of Key Terms

Common/Profane: The ordinary, everyday realm, accessible to humans, and not specifically set apart for God.

Clean: The normal, proper state of a person or thing within the divinely ordained order.

Unclean/Polluted: A state of ritual impurity that results from transgressing boundaries or coming into contact with something that violates the divine order.

Holy: Set apart for God, possessing a higher degree of sacredness and requiring special treatment and reverence.

Purity Maps: Conceptual frameworks that model the order of the cosmos and delineate categories of clean and unclean, holy and common.

Circumcision: The ritual removal of the foreskin, marking the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Temple: The central sanctuary in Jerusalem, embodying a hierarchy of holiness and reflecting the graded levels of access to God.

Sabbath: The seventh day of the week, designated as holy and requiring rest from labor.

Dietary Laws (Kashrut): Regulations governing the types of animals and the methods of preparation permitted for consumption by Jews.

Secondary Pollution: A Pharisaic concern with becoming unclean through contact with something that has already been touched by something unclean.

Purification Rites: Ritual actions prescribed to remove pollution and restore a person or object to a state of ritual cleanness.

4. Briefing Document

Briefing Doc: Purity and Pollution in the Cultural World of the New Testament

Source: Dr. David deSilva, The Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 7, Purity and Pollution

Main Themes:

- **Understanding the Ancient Concept of Purity and Pollution:** Modern Western Christians often struggle to grasp the significance of purity laws in the Old Testament. This briefing explores the pervasive influence of purity and pollution concepts in ancient Israelite and Second Temple Jewish culture, drawing parallels to modern sensitivities regarding dirt, food, and social interactions.
- **The Importance of Leviticus:** Leviticus, often dismissed as irrelevant, provides crucial insights into ancient purity codes. These codes, encompassing people, spaces, time, food, and individual bodies, served not merely as ritualistic practices but as a framework for understanding God's ordained order and Israel's identity as a holy people.
- **Holiness and the Divine Order:** The concept of holiness, defined as "that which is set apart from the ordinary," is central to understanding purity codes. The holy, charged with power, cannot tolerate pollution, necessitating clear guidelines for maintaining purity and avoiding contact with the unclean.
- **Social Consequences of Purity Codes:** Purity codes had profound social consequences, shaping interactions within the Jewish community and with outsiders. They reinforced internal hierarchies, defined boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, and influenced social behaviors.
- **Meaning and Interpretation of Purity Laws:** While originating from divine command, purity laws were interpreted and adapted over time. Later Jewish texts, such as the Letter of Aristeas and 4 Maccabees, attempted to explain and find new meaning in these ancient codes, linking them to moral principles and self-control.

Most Important Ideas/Facts:

- **The Holy and the Common:** This distinction categorizes things as belonging to the ordinary realm or set apart for God.

- **The Clean and the Unclean:** This categorization denotes the normal state of a person or thing versus a state of pollution or defilement.
- **Purity Maps:** These conceptual models outline the divinely ordained order for various aspects of life, including people, spaces, time, food, and individual bodies.
- **The Temple as a Model of Purity:** The Temple's layout reflected the hierarchy of holiness within Israel, with different spaces accessible only to those with the requisite level of purity. Encroachment was considered a severe offense.
- **The Land of Israel as Holy:** The land was considered holy and susceptible to defilement, requiring the Israelites to maintain purity to avoid expulsion.
- **The Sabbath as Holy Time:** The seventh day of rest, mirroring God's own rest, was a fundamental marker of Jewish identity.
- **Dietary Laws:** Strict regulations governed which animals and food preparations were considered clean and fit for consumption. These laws played a significant role in maintaining Jewish identity and social cohesion.
- **Pollution and Purification:** Pollution was considered an inevitable part of life, requiring specific purification rituals to restore cleanliness and maintain the divine order.
- **Levels of Concern:** The level of concern with purity varied depending on proximity to the holy. Priests, for example, were held to a higher standard than lay Israelites.

Key Quotes:

- "What is holiness? The holy is that which is set apart from the ordinary. It is perfect, whole, complete, and charged with power in regard to ordinary life."
- "Purity has to do with a conception of a divinely ordained order for the cosmos and for everything in that cosmos. ... Conversely, pollution has to do with crossing boundaries that ought not to be crossed, moving out of place, doing what is improper in a certain place or time, and moving into a state where order is somehow decayed."
- "The typical first-century Jew, taking her cue from the Torah itself, made no distinction between a ritual law and a moral law. It was all law."
- "All of this matters only because of another factor: the presence of the Holy. In Israel, this is specifically the presence of the one holy God."

- "The observant Jew was interested in maintaining purity in connection with having clean hands and a pure heart."

Implications for Understanding the New Testament:

Understanding the pervasive influence of purity and pollution concepts in ancient Jewish culture is crucial for interpreting the New Testament. Jesus's interactions with the unclean, the debates surrounding food laws, and the concept of spiritual purity all take on deeper meaning when viewed through this cultural lens. This briefing provides a foundation for appreciating the cultural context and significance of these themes in the New Testament.

5. FAQs on deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 7, Purity and Pollution, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ: Purity and Pollution in Ancient Israel

1. Why did purity laws matter so much to ancient Israelites?

Purity laws were central to the ancient Israelite worldview because they believed in a holy God who demanded holiness from his people. These laws weren't just arbitrary rules; they reflected a divinely ordained order for the cosmos, where everything had its proper place. Pollution, which represented a disruption of this order, could have disastrous consequences, including expulsion from the Promised Land.

2. What's the difference between "holy" and "clean" in the Old Testament?

"Holy" (or sacred) refers to something set apart for God, separate from the ordinary. "Clean," on the other hand, describes a person or thing in its normal, unpolluted state. Lay Israelites were typically "clean" and "common" – meaning not holy. Priests were "clean" and "holy," reflecting their special status.

3. Did ancient Israelites view ritual laws differently from moral laws?

Unlike modern perspectives, ancient Israelites saw all laws as equally important and binding, whether they related to ritual practices (like food laws) or ethical behavior (like loving your neighbor). They were all part of a single, coherent instruction for living in covenant with a holy God.

4. How did purity laws shape social interactions in ancient Israel?

Purity laws served as "maps" that defined boundaries and hierarchies within Israelite society. For example, the Temple had different areas accessible only to certain groups, reflecting their varying levels of holiness. Dietary laws also played a role, as the need for specially prepared food encouraged Jews to form close-knit communities, particularly in the Diaspora.

5. Were all types of pollution equally serious?

No, some pollutions were considered more severe than others. While everyday pollutions like menstruation or contact with a dead body could be addressed through purification rituals, certain transgressions like idolatry or murder had no remedy and resulted in expulsion or even death.

6. Did the concept of "secondary pollution" exist in ancient Israel?

Yes, but it wasn't universally observed. The Pharisees, known for their strict interpretation of purity laws, were particularly concerned with secondary pollution, meaning they avoided contact not just with unclean things, but also with anything that had touched something unclean. This practice further distinguished them from other Jewish groups.

7. Did Jews ever reinterpret or find new meaning in the purity laws?

Yes, during the Second Temple period, some Jewish communities, especially those in the Diaspora, began to see the purity laws as embodying moral principles or as exercises in self-control. For instance, avoiding certain animals was interpreted as rejecting the vices associated with those creatures.

8. Were purity laws simply about outward rituals, or did they reflect deeper beliefs?

For ancient Israelites, purity practices were outward expressions of their core convictions – obedience to God and a commitment to holiness. They believed that both inward purity ("pure heart") and outward adherence to ritual laws were essential for maintaining a right relationship with their holy God.