

Dr. David deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament

Session 8, Hebrews--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 8, Hebrews--Purity and Pollution, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. David deSilva's lecture analyzes the Book of Hebrews through the lens of ancient purity and pollution codes. **He argues** that the author of Hebrews reinterprets these codes in light of Jesus' sacrifice, viewing it as a **cosmic cleansing ritual** that surpasses the limitations of the Old Testament system. **This cleansing** allows Christians direct access to God's presence, transcending previous restrictions. **DeSilva** connects this interpretation to Pauline theology and emphasizes the implications for modern Christian understanding of holiness and boundaries. Finally, he urges a critical examination of contemporary societal divisions and their compatibility with God's vision of unity in Christ.

2. 21 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. deSilva, Cultural World of the NT, Session 8 – 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_
Session08.mp3**

3. Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 8, Hebrews--Purity and Pollution

Hebrews: Purity and Pollution Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. How does the author of Hebrews' connection to Timothy suggest a link to the Pauline mission?
2. According to the lecture, how did Paul's teachings alter the traditional Jewish purity codes?
3. How does the concept of the Holy Spirit's distribution support the idea of transcending old purity maps?
4. What is the significance of the term "saints" in Hebrews and how does it redefine the concept of purity?
5. How does the author of Hebrews view the earthly Temple in relation to the heavenly one?
6. Why does the author of Hebrews claim that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins?
7. What does the author of Hebrews mean when they assert that Jesus is a superior mediator?
8. How does the Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus 16 provide a framework for the author of Hebrews to interpret Jesus' death and ascension?
9. What actions does the author suggest that Christians should do as a 'sacrifice' to God?
10. According to the lecture, what are the contemporary implications of the early church's purity concerns for modern Christians?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The author of Hebrews mentions that their brother Timothy has been set free, a figure closely associated with Paul. This reference suggests that the letter and its audience are likely connected to the Pauline mission, since Timothy was one of Paul's right-hand people.

2. Paul argued that in Christ, the separation between Jew and Gentile was abolished, creating a new humanity where both groups are on equal terms. This led to the rejection of dietary laws and other purity codes that maintained the boundary between Jew and Gentile.
3. The giving of the Holy Spirit to both Jews and Gentiles who trust in Jesus demonstrates that God's favor and holiness are not limited by traditional ethnic or religious boundaries. This highlights the transcendence of the old purity system.
4. The term "saints," referring to Christians as "holy ones" or "sanctified ones," signifies that they are set apart for God through Christ, distinct from those who are not. This highlights a new kind of boundary focused on being 'in Christ' as opposed to Jewish heritage.
5. The author of Hebrews views the earthly Temple as a copy or model of the heavenly Temple. They focus on the heavenly Temple as the place of true mediation with God.
6. The author of Hebrews contends that the repeated sacrifices of bulls and goats indicate that they are ineffective at removing sins. These sacrifices also only addressed external impurities and not the internal stain of sin on the human conscience.
7. The author suggests that Jesus is a superior mediator because he, unlike Levitical priests, is without sin. Furthermore, Jesus was not made a priest because of his lineage, but on the basis of an indestructible life.
8. The Day of Atonement ritual, with its elements of washing, sacrifice, and the transfer of sin, provides a template for interpreting Jesus' death as a cosmic act of purification. It is through this lens that Jesus' sacrifice becomes a decisive act of cleansing in the heavenly holy of holies.
9. The author encourages Christians to offer "sacrifices of praise," which includes openly professing faith in Christ and engaging in acts of love and service. This highlights a shift from literal sacrifice to actions that are done out of faith.
10. The lecture argues that modern Christians should both transcend unjust societal purity lines while also protecting the holiness of the body of Christ. They should examine their own cultural assumptions and practice mercy, as opposed to abstaining from certain behaviors to gain holiness.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Choose ONE of the following questions to answer in a well-developed essay.

1. Explore the ways in which the author of Hebrews uses the concept of purity and pollution to redefine access to God, and how that new access transforms the believer's experience of their relationship with God.
2. Analyze how the author of Hebrews reinterprets Old Testament sacrificial practices, particularly those associated with the Day of Atonement, and argue for the significance of these re-interpretations.
3. Discuss the significance of the "heavenly temple" in the letter to the Hebrews and explain how this concept contributes to the author's understanding of salvation.
4. Contrast the role of the Levitical priests with the role of Jesus as presented in Hebrews. How does the author argue for Jesus' superiority, and what are the implications for believers?
5. How does the author of Hebrews navigate the tension between establishing new boundaries for the Christian community while also advocating for transcending certain societal boundaries?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Purity Codes:** Religious and cultural rules governing what is considered clean or unclean, often related to bodily functions, foods, and interactions with certain people or objects.
- **Pollution:** A state of being considered unclean or defiled, which can prevent access to sacred spaces or participation in religious rituals.
- **Sanctification:** The process of being set apart for God, made holy, or purified.
- **Levitical Law:** The collection of laws in the Old Testament books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, many of which relate to priestly duties, sacrifices, and purity regulations.
- **Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur):** The most sacred day in the Jewish calendar, marked by rituals involving animal sacrifices and purification to atone for the sins of the people.

- **Holy of Holies:** The innermost sanctuary of the tabernacle and later the Temple, considered the most sacred place where God's presence was believed to dwell.
- **Mercy Seat:** The lid of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, which was sprinkled with blood during atonement rituals.
- **High Priest:** The chief religious leader in ancient Israel, responsible for performing sacrifices and mediating between God and the people.
- **Tabernacle:** The portable tent used as a place of worship by the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness.
- **Heavenly Temple:** The true and eternal dwelling place of God, of which the earthly Temple was considered a copy or shadow.
- **Pauline Mission:** The apostolic ministry of the Apostle Paul, characterized by an emphasis on spreading the gospel among both Jews and Gentiles.
- **Saints:** A term used in the New Testament to refer to believers who have been sanctified and set apart by God.
- **Sacrifice of Praise:** The offering of thanksgiving and adoration to God through words and deeds, which replaces the need for animal sacrifices.

4. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from the provided source, "DeSilva_CWNT_EN_Lecture08.pdf," focusing on the lecture's exploration of Hebrews through the lens of purity and pollution.

Briefing Document: Reading Hebrews Attuned to Purity and Pollution

Source: Excerpts from "DeSilva_CWNT_EN_Lecture08.pdf"

Author: Dr. David deSilva

Date: 2024

Introduction:

This lecture examines the Letter to the Hebrews within the cultural context of ancient purity and pollution codes. It argues that understanding these concepts is crucial to grasping the letter's central claims about Jesus's sacrifice and its implications for believers' access to God. The lecture emphasizes how the author of Hebrews reinterprets and transcends traditional Jewish purity laws while simultaneously applying a new framework of purity that defines the boundaries of the Christian community.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. Pauline Context of Hebrews:

- The letter is likely addressed to a congregation formed by Paul or his associates, as evidenced by the mention of Timothy in Hebrews 13:23, a key figure in the Pauline mission. This suggests that the community would be familiar with Paul's teachings on the abrogation of Jewish law for Gentile believers.
- The author of Hebrews, while not Paul himself, builds on Pauline thought, particularly regarding the breakdown of the Jew/Gentile divide through Christ. As the author notes, unlike Paul, the author of Hebrews acknowledges receiving the Gospel through the preaching of others rather than direct revelation.
- Pauline theology, as seen in Romans and Galatians, emphasizes that the division between Jew and Gentile is no longer valid in Christ, as seen when the author quotes Ephesians 2:14-15, "God has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace."

1. **Transcending Old Purity Codes:**

- In Pauline thought, the Holy Spirit being given to both Jews and Gentiles, the giving of the Spirit transcended "the old purity maps of people".
- Traditional Jewish purity regulations (dietary laws, Sabbath observance, circumcision) that once distinguished Jews from Gentiles are set aside in the new Christian community. The text mentions, "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected provided it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer," (1 Timothy 4:4-5).
- The author of Hebrews shifts the focus from the physical boundary between Jew and Gentile to the spiritual boundary between Christian and non-Christian.

1. **New Boundary: The "Saints":**

- Christians are referred to as "saints" (holy ones), implying a new status of being set apart for God, a sanctified people. The author writes, "the one who is making holy and those who are being made holy, all coming from the same origin, namely Christ and all those who are in Christ."
- This sanctification is not just about belonging to God, but also about being made fit to enter God's unmediated presence.

1. **Sacred Space Reinterpreted:**

- The author of Hebrews is deeply aware of the graded access to God as displayed in the layout of the tabernacle and the temple.
- The author views the tabernacle and temple as copies of the heavenly temple, based on Exodus 25:40, where God tells Moses, "see that you make all things according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain."
- The focus shifts from the earthly temple in Jerusalem to the heavenly temple, where Jesus acts as the true high priest.
- The earthly temple is viewed as merely symbolic with no real effectiveness for mediation with God.

1. **Jesus's Sacrifice as the Ultimate Purification:**

- The author of Hebrews accepts the concept that blood is required for the remission of sins but redefines the terms.

- Jesus's death is seen as a singular, once-for-all sacrifice that provides true cleansing and sanctification for believers. Hebrews 10:10 states, "we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Christ, of Jesus Christ, once and for all."
- This sacrifice cleanses not only external pollution, but also the conscience, unlike the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. As Hebrews 9:13-14 notes, "if the blood of bulls and goats and the sprinkled ash of a heifer sanctify those who have been polluted with regard to the cleanness of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who offered himself blameless to God through the eternal spirit, cleanse our conscience from dead works in order to worship the living God?"
- This single act of sacrifice transforms the status of believers, allowing them to enter God's presence without mediation.
- The blood of Jesus is presented as a "ritual detergent of much greater potency", cleansing people "deep down".

1. **Day of Atonement Framework:**

- The author of Hebrews uses the Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus 16 as an interpretive framework for understanding Jesus's death and ascension.
- The high priest's ritual washing and sacrifices in the tabernacle (or temple) are seen as types pointing towards Jesus' more effective and decisive sacrifice.
- However, the author notes that unlike the high priest, Jesus was sinless. As Hebrews 7 states, "unlike the other high priests, Jesus has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He did this, offering a sacrifice for the sins of the people, he did this once for all when he offered himself."
- Jesus' death outside the city parallels the disposal of sacrificial animals outside the camp. The author mentions, "Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood".
- Jesus' entry into heaven with his own blood is interpreted as a "once for all" event that provides "eternal redemption".
- The author notes that the high priest reemerging from the holy places would signal the conclusion of the day of atonement, and in the same way, Christ will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those waiting.

1. Access to the Heavenly Holy of Holies:

- Believers, through Jesus, now have access to the heavenly holy of holies, not just the earthly copy. "Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf".
- This allows believers to have direct access to God in the heavenly realm. Hebrews 10:19 states, "since we have boldness to enter into the holy places by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith..."
- Baptism is also alluded to as a kind of ritual immersion that further cleanses the Christian, in parallel to the immersion of the high priest.

1. New Sacrificial Practices for Believers:

- While Levitical sacrifices are no longer valid, believers are called to offer new sacrifices of praise, good deeds, and sharing as expressions of their sanctified status. As the author notes in Hebrews 13, "let us always offer to God the sacrifice of praise... Let us not forget to do good or to share, for with sacrifices of this kind, God is well pleased."

1. Contemporary Applications:

- The lecture encourages the audience to re-examine purity lines today, and see if they transcend God's vision for humanity.
- While the lecture acknowledges that it is important to protect the holiness of the body of Christ, it argues that the focus should be on being merciful as God is merciful, rather than avoiding all contact with the polluted.
- This involves protecting the body of Christ from internal dissension, worldly practices, and individual misconduct that would hinder living out God's vision.
- The lecture concludes that understanding the cultural world of the New Testament challenges us to critically assess our own cultural practices.

Quotes of Importance:

- *"God has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace."* (Ephesians 2:14-15, quoted within lecture)

- *"everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected provided it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer." (1 Timothy 4:4-5, quoted within lecture)*
- *"we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Christ, of Jesus Christ, once and for all." (Hebrews 10:10)*
- *"if the blood of bulls and goats and the sprinkled ash of a heifer sanctify those who have been polluted with regard to the cleanness of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who offered himself blameless to God through the eternal spirit, cleanse our conscience from dead works in order to worship the living God?" (Hebrews 9:13-14)*
- *"unlike the other high priests, Jesus has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He did this, offering a sacrifice for the sins of the people, he did this once for all when he offered himself." (Hebrews 7)*
- *"Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood." (Hebrews 13)*
- *"Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf." (Hebrews 9:24)*
- *"since we have boldness to enter into the holy places by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith..." (Hebrews 10:19)*
- *"let us always offer to God the sacrifice of praise... Let us not forget to do good or to share, for with sacrifices of this kind, God is well pleased." (Hebrews 13)*

Conclusion:

This lecture provides a compelling analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews by highlighting the cultural significance of purity and pollution in the first-century world. It demonstrates how the author of Hebrews uses these concepts to articulate the revolutionary nature of Jesus's sacrifice, which not only cleanses from sin but also opens a direct path to God's presence for all believers. The author notes that through his sacrifice, Jesus has created one new humanity, and this understanding of unity is to challenge how we draw purity lines today. This understanding has implications for how we should view our world and the divisions of our own time.

5. FAQs on deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 8, Hebrews--Purity and Pollution, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ: Purity and Pollution in Hebrews and the New Testament

1. **How does the Letter to the Hebrews relate to the teachings of Paul, particularly concerning purity laws?** The Letter to the Hebrews likely comes from a Pauline congregation, indicated by its connection to Timothy, a close associate of Paul. This context is important because Pauline theology emphasizes that the old purity codes separating Jews from Gentiles have been abolished by Christ. The focus shifts to a new community where Jew and Gentile are united and considered holy through faith in Jesus and the reception of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the purity regulations specific to maintaining the Jew/Gentile boundary no longer hold significance.
2. **What significant changes did the Pauline mission bring regarding purity practices such as dietary laws and Sabbath observance?** Pauline Christianity rejects the necessity of dietary regulations, especially those that would separate Jewish and Gentile Christians at meals. Instead, Paul emphasizes that all things are sanctified by God's word and prayer, and encourages acceptance of all food, except that specifically related to idolatry. Likewise, practices like Sabbath observance and circumcision are not considered essential for inclusion in the Christian community. The Sabbath rest is reinterpreted to be about the eternal rest with God, not a specific day of the week.
3. **How does the Letter to the Hebrews utilize purity language, and how does it redefine the concept of "saints"?** While the boundary between Jew and Gentile is discarded, purity language is still used to demarcate Christians from non-Christians. Christians are described as "saints," meaning "holy ones," and are viewed as having undergone a sanctification process that sets them apart for God. The emphasis is on how Christ has cleansed and sanctified believers, enabling them to enter God's unmediated presence, moving beyond just external holiness.

4. **How does the author of Hebrews challenge the traditional map of sacred spaces and access to God?** The author of Hebrews challenges the Old Testament system of graded access to God (e.g., the separation between the Holy Place and Holy of Holies in the temple). The author argues that the earthly temple and its rituals were merely copies of the heavenly temple, which is where the true and decisive act of mediation with God takes place. With Christ's death, access to God is no longer limited but is now open to all believers.
5. **How does the author of Hebrews view the sacrifice of Jesus in comparison to the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament?** The author views the sacrifice of Jesus as a superior and final sacrifice that decisively removes the believer's sins. Unlike the repetitive animal sacrifices which were only effective for external purification, Jesus' sacrifice cleanses the believer's conscience, granting them access to God in the heavenly realm. The blood of bulls and goats was inadequate; only the blood of Jesus could cleanse both the people and the heavenly places themselves.
6. **How does the Day of Atonement ritual serve as a framework for the author's interpretation of Jesus' death and ascension?** The Day of Atonement ritual, involving a high priest, a bull, and two goats, serves as a framework to interpret Jesus's sacrifice. Jesus is portrayed as the high priest who, unlike the Levitical priests, offered a single sacrifice (himself) that is sufficient for all. His death outside the city parallels the removal of the sin-bearing goat. His ascension into heaven, where he mediates on behalf of humanity, parallels the high priest's entry into the Holy of Holies. This culminates in an effective atonement that allows believers access to God's heavenly presence, not just the earthly copy.
7. **How does the author of Hebrews portray the accessibility to God for believers in Christ, and what are the consequences of this new access?** The author of Hebrews describes the believers in Christ now having boldness to enter the "holy places" – the divine realm – not through a hierarchical system, but by the blood of Jesus. This access enables believers to draw near to God with a sincere heart and full assurance. The consequences of this new accessibility are not simply personal purification, but a call to continued discipleship and to continue the work of Christ through the giving of love and service, in addition to acts of praise.

8. **What implications do the themes of purity and pollution in the Letter to the Hebrews have for contemporary life, and how do these relate to our social constructs?** The letter to the Hebrews challenges Christians to transcend social lines and to live out the conviction of unity in Christ. It also calls for a reevaluation of our own societies' "maps of clean and unclean", emphasizing that true holiness is not about avoiding certain people or things, but rather about being merciful, as God is merciful. However, it also urges believers to protect the holiness of the body of Christ from internal dissension, worldly values, and personal misconduct, thereby upholding the significance of the Christian community.