

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

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This is Dr. David deSilva in his teaching on The Cultural World of the New Testament. This is session 7, Purity and Pollution.

You're finishing up a Bible study in your church, and you've come to the end of some book of the Bible like John or Romans, and you ask the class, so what should we study next? And someone says in the back, hey, what about Leviticus? And everyone in the class starts chuckling because they all know it's a joke.

Many Christians, certainly in the Western churches, regard Leviticus as a book that's just not that accessible or meaningful. We would really have to work hard in the West to become sympathetic readers of a text like Leviticus to the point where we wouldn't just regard all of its talk of what's pure and impure, what's polluted and defiled as just some big deal, as in what's the big deal? And we'd have to work hard to push past that to get to the point where we could understand how these concerns really were meaningful for the people concerned in regard to how to relate to a holy God. We face a lot of obstacles in this regard as 21st-century Christians, particularly in the Western world and even more particularly in the Protestant sectors of that world.

We have been largely taught from the outset to regard the purity codes and the ritual laws of the Old Testament as outmoded, externalistic, legalistic, as that which just got in the way of true religion as opposed to manifesting true religion for those who were involved in ancient Israelite, early Jewish religious practice. And Protestant Christians have especially demystified the holy and deregulated access to the holy. Now, this is not universally true, to be sure.

Many of us have no doubt had the experience of finding ourselves in the presence of the holy God, but I would suggest that it might be atypical for us to have the kind of experience that Isaiah had in the sixth chapter of his book, where he was in a holy space, suddenly became aware of the presence of God, and suddenly realized just how impure and polluted he was in the midst of an impure and polluted people, such that he became acutely aware that he could be vaporized at any second and needed purification to be able to remain there safely. We have, I think, largely lost the sense of the power and the danger of the holy that formerly caused so many people to relegate approaching the holy to the religious professionals, usually known as priests.

Now, with free and direct access to God for all believers, without the need for professional mediation, especially as the result of the marvelous work of Christ, and one of those things recovered for Christianity as part of the Reformation heritage, I'd

say recovered for all branches of Christianity as a result of the witness of the Reformation, it is difficult for us to come to a full appreciation of that work of Christ if we don't first understand the old arrangements that he transcended and the rationale that made those arrangements meaningful. So, how can modern Western people, especially, begin to get a handle on the visceral power of purity and pollution for ancient Israelites, Second Temple Jews, and the like? One way is simply to think about dirt and the way we handle dirt. And by dirt, I simply mean soil.

Scoop up a cup of potting soil, for example, and toss it into the garden. Anyone walking by, seeing the dirt there, would say, all right, that's dirt. It's where it belongs.

It's with other dirt. It's in the great outdoors. This is perfectly normal.

Spread out that cup of dirt on the driveway. If you're like me, it won't bother you much. You'll figure a strong wind, a good rain, it'll take care of itself.

But some people would regard that as a defilement of the driveway. They will probably, within 24 hours, be out there with a broom, getting it back to where it belongs, namely, spread out over the grass with the rest of the dirt. Take that cup of dirt and put it on the living room carpet.

Almost no one would allow it to remain there. I say almost no one because they're probably our college guys watching this. But generally, you wouldn't allow it to remain there.

You would very quickly scoop it up and then vacuum the remnants until there is no visible dirt remaining in that space because dirt doesn't belong in the living room carpet. I'm actually reliving some memories of fatherhood saying those very words. Dirt doesn't belong on the living room carpet.

Think also about food, about what we eat, what we don't eat, about where we eat, and where or how rather we handle food, especially around food. We could begin to get a sense that we kind of have our own personal purity and pollution codes that operate rather strongly. I'll eat beef, I'll eat pork, I'll eat chicken.

I won't eat a dog. Why is that? I really can't say if it's because dog tastes terrible. It's just because you don't eat dogs.

You know, in America, I hope I'm not offending any viewers of this. In America, it's just considered taboo to eat dogs or cats, for example. It's not part of our dietary kind of practice.

And we would regard it, if suddenly someone put a plate before us and said, oh, that's curry dog, we would probably be revulsed at the idea. Think about what

happens to food when it falls off a plate. If food falls off a plate on the kitchen counter, many of us might say, oh, well, that's fine.

Just scoop it up, and it's fine. If food falls off the plate onto the floor, many of us viewing might be tempted to throw it away and start over or at least rinse it off. To be honest, being frugal, that would be my solution.

Just rinse it off and eat it. It'll be fine. Some might not care at all.

Just throw it back in the plate, five-second rule, you know how that goes, and persist. How we deal with food may reflect something of our kind of socialized purity and pollution codes. We don't just take our food, throw it onto the living room carpet, and eat off the carpet.

Why not? There's really nothing inherently wrong with doing that. But it strikes us as somehow wrong. That's more of a purity pollution thing in operation than anything ethical or moral or what have you.

Now, let's get a little bit more personal. Think about how you might deal with people who are sick. Yeah, and this is getting very personal because there's a very broad spectrum of reactions here.

Some of us are germaphobes. Let's just be honest. Some of us are germaphobes.

And it's especially the germaphobe who can relate to what I'm about to say. You notice that someone has a cold, and they're sniffing what have you. They may do this, and then they want to shake your hand. What do you do? Do you say, pleased to meet you, fist bump, or something with the other hand? Do you shake the hand and then, at the earliest opportunity, reach for your sanitizer or wash your hand? Or do you just shake the hand and say, yeah, that's fine?

I got snot, too. It's not an issue. These kind of raise to the fore for us our own codes of purity and defilement and how to deal with defilement if we perceive that defilement has happened.

Now, a lot of what I've just been discussing could be explained in terms of our concern with microbes, germs, and the like. But the dynamics that I've been talking about and the visceral reactions that I've been talking about and the fact that we've developed for ourselves, not uniformly in any culture, but for ourselves, ways of dealing with what we perceive to be defilement, get at the visceral feelings that ancient Israelites, Second Temple period Jews, had in regard to those things described in Leviticus. Our own purity codes, by the way, have pervasive social consequences as well, just as ancient Israelites or Second Temple Jewish purity codes had social consequences.

In fact, it could be argued that those purity codes, those pollution taboos, were primarily aimed at social engineering, to keep Jews relating to Jews in close ways, but not to Gentiles, so that Jewish identity, Jewish ethnic boundaries, the boundary of the group, would remain intact. Think about your purity and pollution codes and how they might also have social consequences. Do you go back to someone's home for dinner a second time after noticing that most of the handling of their, sorry, after noticing that their handling of food is less careful than yours? Perhaps you do, perhaps you don't.

Perhaps you say, I'm not going to; I'll have them over for dinner. I like them, but I'm not really comfortable going back there. Or think about homeless people in the midst of your city or town. Maybe you're not reluctant to give a homeless person the right hand of fellowship, but maybe you notice a lot of people are if they even see the homeless person.

A homeless person is a person out of place, a person without a place in society. We all have places, and this is essential to the idea of purity and pollution. Everything has a place, and there's a place for everything.

So, a homeless person is a displaced person. And we may think in terms of hygiene, you know, a homeless person might not have the best access to showers and hand washing and things like that, but ultimately, our thoughts about cleanness might affect our social interactions with that person. The same thing might apply to time.

I don't personally feel this, but a lot of people might feel that if they get a business call at home, their time has been violated, and their time and space have been violated. Conversely, if a person is at work, now this won't apply to you if you're a pastor, but if you're an accountant or something, if you're at work and a person brings up a supremely personal matter and wants to talk about something happening at home for him or her, you might feel that the workplace has been violated, that the work time has been violated. So, we might begin to have some sympathy with ancient codes of purity and pollution if we can resonate with any of the discomforts of the situations I've been talking about or any of the kinds of reactions to what is clean, what is polluted that I've been naming.

Many of our modern purity codes, if they could be called that, as I mentioned, have to do with microbes and contagion. The difference with the ancients is not in the dynamics that I've been describing, but with the fact that they're not so much concerned about catching disease per se, which drives a lot of at least Western modern thinking, but about catching something that would render them unfit for interaction with the holy, and thereby also increase the people, as a whole, the people's unfitness to remain in the presence and under the protection of a holy God. Conversely, and I've also heard this done, trying to explain ancient Jewish purity

codes in modern medical terms really misses the point of why early Jews cared about purity and pollution.

You know, whatever you could say medically about pork to kind of explain, rationalize, justify Jewish dietary regulations just simply is beside the point for why pork was unclean, why the meat of a pig was unclean in the ancient world. And we are imposing a foreign explanation that would not simply have been of any concern to the Jew who might prefer to die under torture than eat a mouthful of pork as, you know, a willful transgression of the law. Purity has to do with a conception of a divinely ordained order for the cosmos and for everything in that cosmos.

As I'd already alluded to just a few moments ago, this has been described as a concern about a place for everything and everything in its place at the cosmic scale. 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. Thus, as we read Leviticus, we notice that there's a lot of concern about things like fluids.

Bodily fluids related to reproduction in some way belong inside bodies and become polluted when they escape and cross that boundary. Work on the day of God's ordained rest is an activity out of place, thinking of a place in terms of a kind of map of time. Lobsters are unclean because they live in the sea but walk as land animals do and so represent a mingling of categories that ought to have been kept separate.

By ought, I mean in terms of this vision for the cosmos and its order, where does everything belong? Where is the place for everything? People suffering from skin separations, oozing skin conditions, often lumped together as leprosy in English translations of the Bible, experience the erosion of a proper boundary, the boundary of the skin, where the person ends and the rest of the world begins, and so have crossed into a state of pollution. 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. 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.

This power can break forth either for blessing or for destruction. And the holy, which has set the cosmos in its perfect order, cannot tolerate pollution. On the one hand, then, Israel desperately needs the benefits that come from the Holy One dwelling in its midst.

On the other hand, Israel has to be extremely careful not to flout the holy with its pollution. Hence, Israel needs clear guidelines, such as Leviticus provides, for

knowing when something or someone has crossed the line from being clean to being polluted. Israel also needs clear processes for containing and eliminating pollution.

Hence, purification rites are ways to take that which has crossed into the realm of unclean and bring it back to the realm of the clean. And Israel has to know how to take the proper precautions to keep from bringing pollution into contact with the holy, particularly the holy one. As a side note here, I might just point out that all cultures in the ancient Mediterranean world were concerned about purity and pollution and about approaching the holy in a state of cleanness so as to find blessing rather than incur wrath.

Now, Greek and Roman purity codes were rarely as complex and spelled out to the degree that we find in Leviticus. But, for example, inscriptions have been found laying out the conditions under which a person could approach a particular shrine or temple, or holy place. And so, if one were to go to that holy place to encounter that divine being there, one would first need to abstain from certain pollutions, undergo certain purifications, and the like.

So, we mustn't think that purity and pollution are concepts and codes that are only important, relevant, and meaningful to Jews or Jewish Christians. That's simply not the case. What is the case is that we find the authors in the New Testament write about purity and pollution mainly informed by the Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish purity codes and rituals and the like.

Because, of course, that is the background of perhaps all, presumably most, if not all, of the New Testament authors. So, let's spend some time thinking together about Leviticus and about purity and pollution as communicated in that text. I might just start with a few verses from Leviticus 10.

Which introduces the major categories that we'll need to be talking about. The Lord spoke to Aaron, saying that you are to distinguish between the holy and the common and between the unclean and the clean. And you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses.

Now, in this short text, we find two sets of categories that are paired categories. There's the holy and the common, one related pair of categories. There's the clean and the unclean, a second related pair of categories.

Notice also that the primary function of the priest here in this text is to make sure that the whole people knows about these categories and how God has determined and prescribed how the people will handle these categories. Hence, all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to the people by Moses. Let's think about that first pair of categories, the common as opposed to the holy.

Common or profane, although in English, profane has negative connotations like profanity, but the common or the secular or the profane is a generally neutral term. It refers to the ordinary spaces and the ordinary things of the world that are accessible to human beings. Holy is, by contrast, a term that is charged with meaning.

Common is kind of an unmarked term. It's not a very special term for the pair, but holy is a special term of the pair. That is to say, the pair exists to highlight the holy, not to highlight the common.

The holy refers to special places or special things that have been set apart from the common, from the ordinary, as belonging in some special way to God. The second pair of terms is clean and unclean. Clean is actually the neutral term in this pair.

It's the not-so-special term. And it refers generally to a person or a thing in its normal state. A brilliant text about all of this is *Raising Up a Faithful Priest*, a book written by Richard Nelson.

In that book, he writes that which is clean may be thought of as that which is in its proper place within the boundaries established by God in creation and whose own external boundaries are whole and intact. Unclean, by contrast, is a meaning-charged term. It denotes something that has crossed the line from the normal state into a dangerous state of pollution.

Now, both these sets of terms are operative all the time. You could describe anything, anyone, by one category from each of these pairs. The typical lay Israelite would be clean and common most of the time.

Sometimes, he or she would become unclean and would have to deal with or somehow account for and manage the uncleanness. But most of the time, the typical lay Israelite is clean and common. If she incurs or he incurs defilement, he or she becomes unclean and common.

For example, a woman during the time of her menstrual flow has become unclean and is still common. But that state doesn't persist at the end of the flow. She undergoes a purification and becomes clean and common once again.

Same thing with a guy who has a nocturnal emission. Food sold in the Jewish market would be, hopefully, clean and common. It would be the right kind of food, handled rightly, and it would be ordinary.

It would be accessible for any lay Israelite to eat. The problem with food sold in a Gentile market is that it would, in all likelihood, be unclean and common and so inappropriate for a Jew to eat. Unclean by virtue of having been, having come from

an animal sacrifice to an idol in a temple or from an animal that had been improperly slaughtered such that the blood remained in the tissue and remained there to be eaten later, and what have you.

The tithes were collected for the priests, and this means part of the produce of the land, so not all wheat, but some wheat. Not all olive oil or wine, but some olive oil and wine. The tithes collected for the priests were clean and holy.

So, they were only to be eaten by the holy personnel, the priests, in a state of cleanness. For the common lay Israelite to eat part of what had been the tithe would be for a common person to arrogate the holy to himself or herself, and that would be a violation of these categories. It would profane the tithe and the holy substances and provoke divine wrath.

A graveyard was unclean and common, while the temple precincts were clean and holy. These classifications all existed to preserve against bringing the unclean into the presence of the holy. The ancient mindset concerning the combination of unclean and holy could be compared, and forgive the Western cultural analogy, to the attitude of the crew of the starship Enterprise in regard to matter and antimatter coming into contact.

You wanted to avoid that at all costs because the destructive force of those two things meeting could be disastrous. One more thing that we need to grasp. 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. It was all equally law and all equally meaningful and binding as such. It was a single coherent instruction concerning how to live before and keep covenant with a holy God.

This is seen in the easy juxtaposition of the two throughout Leviticus. For example, in this very important text from Leviticus 19:18 to 19. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons and daughters of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

I am the Lord. You will keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind.

You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made with two kinds of material. You see right here, next to each other in these two verses, what we moderns might immediately regard as a bit of moral instruction. Don't bear a grudge.

Don't take vengeance. Love your neighbor as yourself. That's one verse from Leviticus that all of us know.

And something that we might categorize as pertaining to ritual law. What does it matter ethically to sow in a single field? I'm obviously not a farmer because I am now struggling. Barley and wheat or soy and wheat.

Obviously, you know, it's not convenient unless you really like soy and all of your wheat products. But it's not an ethical question for us. It must pertain to the ritual desire not to mix things that are discreet and separate.

So, but for the ancient Israelite, for the Second Temple period Jew, this is all simply the way God has instructed us to live, a coherent whole. This non-distinction can also be seen from the fact that the same kind of offering, what we might translate as a guilt offering, was required to deal with pollution resulting from fraud in a business dealing and contracting pollution through contact with an unclean person or animal. So again, we would say, oh, the first is a moral consideration.

The second is a ritual consideration. For the first-century Jew, both were simply pollution considerations and were held together thus. I'd like to take a little time to think with you all about early Judaism's purity maps.

Purity maps provide models of the order of the cosmos, models of what it looks like for everything to be in its proper place in relation to everything else. They provide a norm or a benchmark against which a person can discern when something is out of place and, therefore, needs special treatment or attention, whether avoidance or purification. And within early Judaism, we can talk about maps of people, maps of spaces, maps of time, maps of foods, and maps of individual bodies.

And these various maps, which might appear to be disjointed to us at first, are actually mutually reinforcing. They especially work together to reinforce both the external boundaries of the Jewish community, that is to say, where Jews stop and Gentiles begin, and the internal structures and hierarchies, the internal order within the Jewish community. So first, let's think about maps of people.

The first level of mapping would distinguish the Israelite from the non-Israelite. The Gentile is basically off the map. And the Israelite is considered de facto clean.

The non-Israelite is de facto unclean. Why? Because God has chosen the Israelite as proper, as clean for himself, but has specifically selected the Israelite out from all those other nations, which are not proper for God's self, for God's own self. In Leviticus, what seems to me to be a kind of essential command, it is uttered, I think, at least three times, but here it is in Leviticus 11:44. We find God saying, I am the Lord your God.

You must keep yourselves holy and be holy because I am holy. So, the choice of Israel on God's part puts a special burden upon Israel to reflect the holiness of God and to reflect God's own act of distinguishing between clean and unclean in its daily ongoing practice. Circumcision distinguishes the Israelites from most non-Israelites in the ancient world.

There are exceptions, but ultimately, when a Gentile thinks about circumcision, the Gentile thinks about the Jew, and rarely about certain Egyptian priests, etc., etc., etc. Circumcision was a ritual that inscribed upon the body of the Israelite male the specialness of the Israelite, the fact that Israelite was set apart from all other peoples of the earth to be God's, to be in covenant with, to be God's own is what I mean there, to be in covenant with God. Now, within Israel, there are gradations of holiness reinforcing internal hierarchies and internal order within the Jewish people within the Israelite nation.

So, at the bottom level, if I could put it that way, of holiness, you have lay Israelites, male and female. And they're clean but common. But within Israel, you have one tribe in particular that has been further set apart for God.

All of the Israelites have been set apart for God from Gentiles. But within Israel, the tribe of Levi has been further set apart for God. Thus, Levites came to have the special responsibility of looking after the physical structures and all the ritual activity of the tabernacle and the temple.

Within the tribe of Levi, you have further groups set further apart for God. These would be the priestly orders within Levi, the priestly clans, or family lines within the tribe of Levi. And these priests had further access to God than the typical Levite, who had further access to God than the typical Israelite did.

And amongst all the high priests, sorry, amongst all the priests, spoiler alert, there was one person, one man, the high priest, who was the most set apart for God of the entire people. And because of his greater level of being set apart, he had access to God, to God's holy spaces, beyond that of any of his priestly colleagues. So, really thinking about these internal lines of purity, which incidentally then reinforced the hierarchy, the priestly governance of ancient Israel, and to a large extent, Second Temple Judah or Judea into the Roman period, to a large extent, not fully, but to a large extent.

And so holiness codes reinforce internal structure here. And we've already kind of moved into maps of spaces because they're so interconnected with the maps of people in the Torah. And the temple is a kind of a model, both of the hierarchy within Israel, based on who can cross what line and then go no further, as well as a

representation of Israel's greater holiness than all other people of the world as a whole.

So, if you can visualize any model or image of the temple that you might ever have seen, you know that outside, the outermost area is known as the Court of the Gentiles, which is actually a bit of a misnomer. I haven't seen it called that in ancient texts, but I have found it described as the court open to all peoples, the court open to all tribes, for example, in 4th Maccabees 4:11. The upshot is, though, this is the space into which Gentiles could come and no further. Jews, of course, could go there as well.

That's kind of the point of being open to all tribes, all nations. But Gentiles could go up to there to a certain point, beyond which they could not go by virtue of their lack of having the requisite set-apartness. It probably wasn't the case in the Tabernacle at all.

Maybe not even in the first temple. But in the second temple, there were a series of inscriptions, some of which have been found. A complete one exists and is now housed in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum.

A bunch of stones written in Greek basically warned Gentiles that they could not pass this point. And if they do, they have only themselves to blame for their quickly ensuing death. So, the ultimate no trespassing sign.

Beyond that, however, there were several other courts—first, the court of Israelite women. So, Israelite women were more set apart than Gentiles for God.

They could enter into the next area within the temple and have closer access to God, physically speaking, than all the non-Israelite nations. Beyond that, there even was a court of Israelite men, Israelite laity, and male laity. So, another internal distinction.

Now, within the court of Israelite men, we find the actual sanctuary. First, an altar in front of the sanctuary. And then, the sanctuary itself, which is composed of two, essentially two chambers.

The first of which is called the holy place. The second of which, behind the holy place, is the holiest place—the holy of holies, as it's typically known.

And the holy place is a space into which priests could go. They could operate, of course, in the court of priests, at the altar, and enter into the holy place when it was their turn, for example, to burn incense before the Lord. But into the holiest place, the holy of holies, which was kind of conceptualized as the place where the divine and human realms intersected.

Only the high priest could go. And that, only once a year. And that is only hedged in by very careful purificatory rites and pollution avoidances.

Encroachment is a concept that we encounter in; it might not be Leviticus, but it might be Numbers. But if someone crosses beyond that point, that they are, for want of a better word, entitled to go by virtue of their level of set-apartness, that person should be killed by the temple guards that are there because successful encroachment is a defilement of those holy places.

And, therefore, a dangerous provocation of God. Now, there are some marvelous stories related to this in the 2nd and 3rd Maccabees. This is my short infomercial for the Apocrypha.

But stories of Gentile leaders who try to go further than they have a right to go. And in these stories, once they leave the court open to all people, and move into the holier places that are meant for other people, God intervenes in some marvelous, miraculous way, in response to the prayers of God's people, who are praying that God won't let the sanctuary be defiled. And for example, in 2nd Maccabees, it's an appointee of the Seleucid king, Seleucus IV, poor general named Heliodorus.

He's just doing what he's told. And he goes in, and it's like he has a stroke right then and there. And as the story is told in 2nd Maccabees, angels on horseback beat him up and toss him to and fro.

And it's only because of the intervention of the high priest, Onias, that he escapes with his life. Whatever we might make of that story historically, it tells us something very important about the temple in terms of purity and pollution. Encroachment is deadly.

The holiness of the place, while potentially a blessing, is deadly. If you misstep in the presence of the holy, it could be deadly. Now, the land of Israel was also regarded as holier than the lands of the Gentile nations.

Again, because of God's choice. God chose Israel to be his dwelling, as well as the place that he would give to his own people. It was the pollution and the uncleanness of the Canaanites that were cited as a reason for their expulsion and, to a large extent, their extermination.

And this is a threat that continues to loom over Israel in this literature. If they multiply uncleanness, if they're not attentive to containing pollution and eliminating pollution in the land, the land will vomit them out, just as it did the Canaanites before them. Now, there are also maps of time in ancient Israel.

And perhaps the most obvious map of time is the rhythm of the week. There are six days in which to do labor, but the seventh day is set apart, just as the priests are set apart more than the laity of Israel, more than the rest of the nations. The seventh day is set apart by God, and it is, therefore, holy to the Lord.

And that holiness must be respected by God's holy people, and the people called to be holy as I am holy. Hence, the Sabbath, the seventh day rest, becomes an essential marker of Jewish identity, as well as, theoretically, an inviolable practice. The penalty of death existed in Israel for violations of the Sabbath.

So, we have these rhythms every week that are also reminders of the holiness of the people of Israel who have been chosen by the holy God to reflect his holiness by doing what God did, by resting on the Sabbath day. And, of course, there's a broader sacred calendar of ordinary times and sacred times across the year. For example, the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Pentecost, or, oh boy, this is an embarrassing moment, and booths.

Thank you to the gentleman behind the camera. Thank you, Dr. Hildebrand. So these three times are sacred times.

They're not to be treated like the rest of the year. They are to be treated in a special way, reflective of the holiness of the time and the holiness of what is being remembered during that time. So, we have those maps as well.

And as I mentioned, there are also maps of food or maps surrounding food. These are probably the most commonly thought of in terms of the purity and pollution, the clean and unclean regulations of Leviticus, even of Jews, and in the ancient world. If a Gentile knew three things about a Jew, he or she knew they were circumcised, they observed the Sabbath, and they were really funny about what they'd eat and what they wouldn't eat.

But Leviticus lays out what animals are clean and what animals are unclean. Clean animals include land animals that have two characteristics. They ruminate, they chew the cud, and they have split hooves.

If an animal has one but not the other, it's not clean. If an animal has neither, it's not clean. Sea creatures can be clean.

Those that are clean are those that have both fins and scales. If they lack one or the other or both, they're unclean because it's a mixing of categories. It's an aberration in God's order.

I had mentioned the lobster, for example, who lives in the water but walks on land. That's crossing God's categories. It could be fine for Gentiles to eat lobster because Gentiles are unclean, and lobsters are unclean.

They go together beautifully. But the people that have been set apart to be holy to the Lord must make the distinction between clean and unclean that God himself made in choosing this person and not that people, not those people. Also, there are careful regulations about what portions of food are proper for what consumers.

Blood belongs to God. A famous verse in Leviticus is that the blood is the life, and the blood is given for a special purpose, not to be ingested but to make atonement for the sins of the holy people. Blood belongs to God.

So, Jews don't eat blood. They carefully remove blood from the tissue before they ingest it. Also, though, take, for example, a sacrificial animal.

Most of those animals got eaten by somebody. Not always. There were some whole burnt offerings.

But if I took a thank offering to the temple, I actually got to eat a good amount of it. But the priests got to eat certain portions of it and God got to figuratively eat or receive certain portions of it. Those portions that were wholly burnt up were God's to enjoy.

Certain portions, and I cannot remember which, belonged to the priests to enjoy. And the lay offerer would not eat the priest's portion because that was holy to the priests. It belonged to him.

The lay offerer and his or her family could eat the remainder. And so, on the one hand, we've got attention to food, but that attention to food reinforces the internal hierarchies of Israel with God at the top, with the priests in the next echelon, and everyone else below. The attention as I said, a lot of these regulations are mutually reinforcing.

The attention to food largely reinforces the distinction between Israelite and non-Israelite. And even Jews came to recognize this as kind of a primary function of the dietary regulations. They are given to keep us from mingling too freely with people of other nations, with their crazy ideas about religion and God and morality.

So, the fact that Jews had to take special care to eat clean foods, prepared in clean ways, no blood, not strangled and things like that, meant that they were going to create their own markets in diaspora settings, for example. So, they could be assured that they were getting clean foods, cleanly prepared. And that, in turn, means that

Jews will organize themselves more in close-knit communities in the diaspora cities because they will be organized around their own markets.

And so, the dietary regulations about what to eat and what not to eat end up also reinforcing the maps of people and Israel's call to be distinct, to be different, to be set apart from all the rest of the peoples of the earth because that was God's choice. Finally, we look at maps of the body. Here, Leviticus is at its most interesting point, where it pays attention to surfaces.

For example, the surface of the skin, the surface of clothing, and also orifices, those openings in the body as places where defilement can enter, or pollution can exit. And, you know, the idea is that the body should be intact, and that which is inside should typically remain inside. And one must be careful about what comes in from outside.

That pertains more to the food categories, I suppose. But here, bodies should not ooze fluids. The skin should not be permeable, as in the various kinds of eczema labeled as leprosy in Leviticus and elsewhere.

And bodies that have passed from life to death or that symbolize the passage from life to death. For example, the menstrual flow of a woman symbolizes, in effect, a life that didn't happen, become a source of pollution. The individual body becomes a kind of symbol for the social body.

Concerns about the integrity of the boundaries of the individual body reflect concerns about the integrity of the boundaries of the social body. Now, another brilliant scholar in this regard, Richard Nelson, and I now mention Mary Douglas, wrote; she wrote a lot about Leviticus, but kind of her signature work is *Purity and Danger*. Her extensive study of modern tribal cultures, as well as ancient Israelite culture, led her to the insight that the body, the individual physical body, is a model that can stand for any bounded system.

And so, as we think about, as we read Leviticus in terms of what crosses this boundary, the boundary of the skin, we might do well also to think about that as a way of reinforcing Israel's concern about the boundaries of Israel itself and what enters into Israel and what goes out from Israel. Now, I should say that pollution itself was generally not a problem. It was not the case that Jews sought to avoid pollution at all costs.

It was unavoidable. Every month, a woman would have a menstrual flow. Everyone would suffer the loss of relatives to death and have to deal with the body and bury the body.

Uncleanness, I should say pollution, is unavoidable. What one needs to do is to know if and when it has occurred so that the proper purification rites can be observed to dispel the pollution, so that that pollution can be contained and dealt with rather than spread, multiply, and build up within the land and thus threaten to make the land vomit out its inhabitants once more. Pollutions occur throughout the Holy Land, and what's interesting, maybe a bit bizarre, is that pollution has an effect on the Holy of Holies itself.

As we would see if we were to look closely at the Day of Atonement ritual, it is not just a matter that we've got to deal with pollution out there, but we've kind of got to deal with the effects of pollution here, in the innermost place where humans interact with the divine. And so attention is given to cleansing the sanctuary, the innermost sanctuary where nobody ever goes, of the pollution that has been happening all year out there. It is noteworthy that there are no purification rites and no sacrifices prescribed for some pollutions, suggesting that there is just no redress for some pollutions, in ancient Israel at least, except for the destruction of the polluted.

This pertains, for example, to the person who knowingly eats unclean food, participates in idolatry, or violates the Sabbath. I'm going to take a little more time here now to think about what makes purity codes meaningful for the participants. I've already mentioned a few of these, but I want to bring them together.

The first and foremost is the command by God, Be holy, for I am holy. Israel's choice, sorry, God's choice of Israel, is also a commission to Israel to keep itself in a state where it can belong to the holy God, where it can interact with the holy God. The holy God's association of himself with Israel, choosing to live in their midst in a special way compared to everywhere else, requires that the people as a whole be holy and pay attention to these issues of purity and pollution that allow for contact with the divine to be beneficial and not destructive.

The land that is holy to the Lord, the land of Israel, requires people who will be holy and not defile it. Again, Leviticus 18 is a good passage to read here. Again, it was the pollution of the Canaanites that led the land itself to spit them out, figuratively speaking.

And so it must be that those who now inhabit the land must observe the level of purity and deal with the pollution effectively so that the land will retain them. One very interesting text, I think at least, is Leviticus 20:22 to 26. This is again where we see Israel's concern with distinguishing between clean and unclean, mirroring God's choice of Israel to be separate and distinct from all the other peoples of the earth.

So again, the mirroring of the social boundary and the social identity of Israel vis-a-vis all other people groups is that which infuses and is reinforced by every decision that any Israelite makes regarding what is clean or unclean. Observing the Sabbath,

incidentally, is also primarily conceived of as mirroring God's activity, whether that becomes a witness to God's work in creating the world, as opposed to any other God creating the world, or a witness to God's redemptive work creating Israel as a people by bringing it out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. During the Second Temple period, especially in the Diaspora, we find Jews looking for yet other ways to explain and render meaningful the regulations of Leviticus, among other texts.

For example, it has become increasingly common, especially in Alexandrian or Antiochian Judaism, to think about dietary laws as encoding moral principles. So, for example, in the Letter of Aristeas, perhaps a first century BC text written probably in Egypt, maybe then even in Alexandria, Egypt, we find that animals have certain characteristics or ascribed certain characteristics. And so, the avoidance of eating this animal is really a moral instruction against embodying the characteristics of that animal.

Hence, Israelites and Jews do not eat vultures or buzzards because we are taught thereby not to prey upon the weak or the dying. And so, actually, in that text you have a long disquisition about various animals and the vices that are associated with them. So, this becomes a way of thinking in a new age about the meaningfulness of their own purity laws and their own dietary regulations.

Another text in this regard is 4 Maccabees, where the dietary laws themselves are not moralized or allegorized, but they are seen as kind of a God-given training exercise program to develop the virtue of self-control. So, we abstain from the most succulent and tasty meats like pork and lobster, and that's God's way of teaching us to curb our passions, to curb our desires, and exercise us on a daily basis in self-control so that we can also make larger moral decisions armed with, equipped with, self-control. In conclusion, I want to say a few words about levels of concern with purity.

The closer you were to the center of where the holy God dwelt, the more concerned it seemed you had to be about purity and pollution. The temple staff, priests, and Levites, not only while in residence in Jerusalem but generally throughout the year, had to take precautions against many pollutions that would be quite fine for lay people to incur while the lay people were away from the temple. Thus, priests could only attend to the burial of their closest relatives but were prohibited from incurring corpse pollution for other people, whereas the lay Israelites could bury anybody and take care of them.

In fact, it's a lauded act of charity for Tobit, another intertestamental text, for Tobit to bury exposed Israelites. But a priest could not do that. A priest would be restricted to burying his closest family relations.

All those who enter the sacred precincts of the temple will be more attentive to purity and pollution, to levels of purity, than they would back home in Modin or Gamla. All Jews were to be concerned with the containment and dispelling of pollution incurred throughout the land, lest the land vomit them out. But of course, again, that doesn't mean that they avoided pollution at all costs.

They just dealt with it when it was incurred. There are a number of prohibited pollutions that were to be avoided by all Jews at all costs. For example, the intentional delay of purifications for permitted pollution constituted a willful transgression, and it polluted the holy places.

Corpse pollution for priests, as I just mentioned, except for the priest's closest of kin. Certain sexual pollutions, incest, intercourse with a woman during her menstrual flow, bestiality, and homosexual practices. Association with idols or idol worship was a pollution for which there was no purification.

Also, murder, neglect of circumcision, and defilement of the temple or the Sabbath. One noteworthy variable within at least Second Temple Judaism was concern with secondary pollution, which is caused by something touched by a person or thing that was itself unclean. Most Jews were not concerned about secondary pollution.

But the Pharisees, it seems, distinguished themselves by being concerned about secondary pollution. So, they wouldn't just take care of the pollution incurred by the unclean person who touched them, but by the thing that might have been touched by the unclean person that they might touch. And so, they regulated their association with other Jews accordingly.

This is why Pharisees tended to be such a clearly differentiated group and why they ate with other Pharisees, as opposed to eating with any other lay Israelite. The observant Jew was interested in maintaining purity in connection with having clean hands and a pure heart. I just want to emphasize in closing that the ancient Israelite, the Second Temple Jew, was concerned with purity both in terms of what we would call ethics and intent and in terms of what we would call ritual purity.

The regulations and practices were not merely a matter of externals. They were outward reflections of core convictions. Namely, obedience to God's desire that Jews should be holy to God, even as God was holy, and the commitment to live out a reflection of God's holiness in the midst of an unclean world.

This is Dr. David deSilva in his teaching on *The Cultural World of the New Testament*. This is session 7, Purity and Pollution.