

Dr. David deSilva, The Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 8, Reading Hebrews Attuned to 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 8, Reading Hebrews Attuned to Purity and Pollution.

In this closing lecture for this series, we'll look together at how what we've explored about purity and pollution and the rights by means of which one moves from one to the other.

It might open up a New Testament text, and for this topic, we'll go back to the letter to the Hebrews. One of the things that we should probably think about first is the larger issue of some of these purity regulations in a Pauline congregation. It's very likely that the audience that the author of Hebrews addresses was formed as a result of Paul's preaching or the preaching of one of Paul's close colleagues.

One of the very few clues that we have about the letter itself comes from the closing greetings in chapter 13, verse 23. The author writes I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free, and if he comes in time, he'll be with me when I see you. So that link with Timothy, who obviously was one of Paul's right-hand people on Paul's team, links this letter and the church or churches that this letter addresses to the Pauline mission.

If this were a course on Hebrews, we could talk about the authorship issues in regard to Hebrews. It's, I would say, certainly not by the Apostle Paul himself for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that the author speaks of himself as receiving the word through the preaching of others. Whereas Paul is explicit and adamant in his other epistles, like Galatians, that he received the gospel and came to faith by a direct revelation of God and not through a man or through men.

So, we probably are looking at a text that comes from the Pauline mission. And this reference in 13.23 shows some ongoing interest in coordinating the movements of members of the Pauline team. Now, one thing that we can say, since this is, therefore, a Pauline congregation, is that a very important element of the Israelite purity codes has already been dealt with and set aside.

And that is the boundary between Jew and non-Jew in Paul's understanding of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Again, turning to some of the cardinal Pauline letters, Romans and Galatians, Paul is very forthright and develops at length the idea that the separation of the Jew from the other peoples of the earth belongs to the past in

God's history of dealing with humanity. And that now, in Christ, something decisively new has happened that brings the Jew and the Gentile together on equal terms, on the same terms.

Although the authorship of Ephesians is disputed, I do happen to think this one is Pauline, which is by Paul. No matter who wrote it, the author really understands Paul's emphasis in regard to maps of people and the change that has happened in the map of people in regard to Jews and Gentiles. So, we read in 2:14 and 2:15, 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. The author of Hebrews speaks also about the experience of the Holy Spirit on the part of that congregation. They have enjoyed distributions of the Holy Spirit according to God's will as part of their experience of conversion.

Also, the author speaks of their having received a share of the Holy Spirit. This emphasis on the Holy Spirit also recalls emphases in Paul's letters, as well as Acts chapters 10:11 and 15, to the effect that the giving of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to Jew and Gentile alike on the basis of their trusting Jesus, is an indication of the transcendence of the old purity maps of people. Gentiles are now holy to the Lord as well if they trust in Christ, just as Jews are holy to the Lord as they trust in Christ.

And the giving of the Holy Spirit to both in Christ confirms this rewriting of purity maps. So, if God no longer intended for a barrier to exist between Jew and Gentile within the new people of God brought together in Christ, all the purity codes related to maintaining that boundary fall away and, indeed, need to be put away to the extent that they separate what God has now joined in one body. So, we find Pauline Christianity rejecting the necessity of dietary regulations, and in fact, necessitating the rejecting of dietary regulations where those might keep Jews eating at separate Jewish Christians eating at separate tables from Gentile Christians.

We see that reflected, for example, in Galatians 2:11 to 14 quite prominently. And here in 1 Timothy 4:4 to 5, kind of articulate as a general principle, everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected provided it is received with thanksgiving. And here's the keyword, for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer.

Interestingly, however, Paul himself and members of the Pauline mission continue to be very careful about food sacrificed to idols. If the food is really detached from any connection, material or verbal, with an idol, it's okay. But as soon as the topic of idolatry comes up, it becomes something to abstain from because that boundary, the

boundary between the people of God and Christ and idolatrous practice, remains a boundary that must be preserved at all costs.

Even Sabbath observance, which had been another clear marker of difference, and circumcision as a right, no longer have prescriptive value in the new community of Christ as far as Paul and his mission are concerned. And when our author, the author of Hebrews, writes about a Sabbath rest in chapter 4:9 to 11, the Sabbath rest that concerns him is not the rest of the seventh day every week in this world. It's the Sabbath rest enjoyed beyond this realm eternally.

It's the place where God has gone to rest, the divine realm beyond the material, visible creation. It is the heavenly homeland, the abiding city, the heavenly realm in which God's full presence dwells. All of that kind of said up front, kind of refocusing purity and pollution concerns within the Pauline mission, we do still find purity language being employed to reinforce boundaries.

It is not, however, the boundary between Jew and Gentile as such, but the new boundary between Christian, whether Jew or Gentile, and non-Christian, whether Jew or Gentile. This is seen, for example, in the common way of speaking about Christians as the saints, a kind of lone word from Latin, meaning the holy ones, the sanctified ones. This is one instance, and we see it throughout Hebrews, for example, in 6.10. The author refers to the congregations serving one another, serving the saints, and continuing so to serve.

And at the closing greetings, he asks the hearers to greet all the saints, all the sanctified ones, all the holy ones. He even speaks more explicitly in 2.11 about 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. But he speaks then very explicitly about those who are in Christ being set apart, being sanctified, undergoing some kind of ritual action, even if that ritual is understood completely figuratively, that sets them apart for God in a way that others are not set apart for God.

The author of Hebrews goes far beyond this, however, to describe specifically how the Christians have been set apart for God, have been cleansed and sanctified, not only so as to belong to God, but to enter the holy God's unmediated presence. This is a major thrust of Hebrews, which we'll talk about in some detail in a bit, but just to throw it out there. The author of Hebrews is intensely interested in the fact that under the old covenant, the map of spaces remained inviolable.

No matter what happened in the temple, the lay Israelite could not go into the Holy of Holies. Access to God was thus in this map of people and spaces. Access to God was limited, and there was no way to transcend the limitations so as to come before God.

Now, in one sense, of course, every Israelite could come before God. The Psalms are a testimony to the vital prayer life. And just to put another advertisement out there for the Apocrypha, several prayers found therein are a testimony to the vital prayer life of Jews throughout this period in the sense that they could come before God.

But in another very real sense, they could not come before God. They had to stop here and let others go a bit further, even one person. And the author of Hebrews is impressed with the fact that with the death of Jesus, all of that is now blown away.

And everyone who approaches God through Christ is fitted, is sanctified, is made holy to such an extent that he or she cannot just go into the Holy of Holies on earth, which is just a copy anyway but can actually enter the divine realm and live there forever in the real presence of God. And that, for the author of Hebrews, is the major breakthrough that has happened now in Christ. To return to where we are in this particular presentation, though, we look at a few texts in which the author talks about this.

In chapter 10, verse 10, he says, we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Christ, of Jesus Christ, once and for all. And just a few verses later in 10:14, by a single offering, Christ has perfected forever those who are being made holy. The author is talking here about a kind of purification rite, per se, but a sanctification rite that has happened to people who trust in Jesus by virtue of Jesus' death.

Unlike the map of people in ancient Israel, where only the priests underwent a sanctification rite that set them apart to minister in the holy places, the author of Hebrews views the death of Jesus as something that has transformed and sanctified the typical human being who trusts in Jesus so that all of them together can cross those boundaries into God's real presence. Now, the author accepts the basic premise that underlies Israel's sacrificial system, and that is simply, without shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins. But he applies it to the death of Jesus, as opposed to the sacrifices of bulls and goats, as a decisive removal of the believer's sins, not only from the believer's consciences but also from God's memory itself.

And so, we read in Hebrews 9, verses 13 to 14, 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? Here, to make his argument, the author posits a dichotomy between external purification and internal purification. He also looks at animal sacrifices under the Levitical law code as acts that take care of external pollution and deal with it, but don't deal with internal pollution. He makes the claim that the better sacrifice than Jesus' offering of himself, his perfect act of obedience, is, to put it somewhat crassly, a ritual detergent of much greater potency.

It's deep down clean is what it provides, not just the cleanness of the outside that does do something, that allows for some interaction with God, but the cleansing throughout that allows for completely intimate access to God in God's own place, in God's own space, in heaven itself. As I've already mentioned, but now I want to talk in greater detail about the author of Hebrews rewriting the maps of sacred space and personnel that we encountered in our previous lecture. We talked about the map of the temple, and we need to recall that mentally here.

The author of Hebrews is aware, very much aware, of the graded access to God exhibited by those maps of the temple and the map of people who are able, who are equipped by virtue of greater degrees of holiness, to cross which lines on that map. The author of Hebrews believes that this seems to represent quite a new step in Jewish reflection, Jewish Christian reflection on the Old Testament. The author of Hebrews believes that that was not God's best for God's people, that God's vision for God's people ultimately needed to transcend those limitations on access to God's own presence as those maps kind of laid out and perpetuated.

The author doesn't himself seem to have any use for the sacred spaces in Jerusalem, even though he is intensely interested in them. He speaks of them really strictly on a scriptural basis, as opposed to an experiential basis. Everything he says about them is about the tabernacle, about the tent.

He doesn't actually talk about the beautiful marble temple that existed at the time of his, in all likelihood, existed at the time of his writing. Because these are not the spaces where effective mediation with God happens, they are merely of secondary and symbolic importance.

The author of Hebrews, like actually many Jews of the Second Temple period, considered the tabernacle or the temple to be a copy of the heavenly temple. The author of Hebrews, but not himself only, people like the author of Wisdom of Solomon, look to a verse in Exodus that escapes me at the moment in terms of chapter and verse reference, but God tells Moses, see that you make all things according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain. I want to say Exodus 2540, but that's kind of a roll of the dice for me.

And Jews reading that sense, all right, Moses was shown not a blueprint, but Moses was shown the heavenly temple. And gave instructions concerning how to make a model of that in the earthly spaces where sacrifices and mediation would be carried out. The author of Hebrews then says, you know, we're not really concerned about the mediation that happens in the earthly copy.

We're concerned about the mediation that happens in the temple itself, the tabernacle itself, where God dwells. That thing of which the tabernacle and then the temple were a copy. Here, we will talk about Jesus' death and ascension into heaven.

The earthly temple was just a model. Decisively effective mediation would have to wait for someone who could enter the heavenly holy place. There, mediation would be enacted that would make a decisive difference in human access to God.

That would break through all the boundaries on access to God that were represented in the Levitical map of spaces and personnel. The author argues that the sacrificial system of the desert tabernacle, the wilderness tabernacle, and then, of course, later the Jerusalem temple, was never able to deal decisively with people's sins. As he put it, it enabled ongoing activity between people and God to a certain extent but never dealt decisively with those sins such that the people themselves could be rendered clean, sufficiently clean, and holy, to draw nearer to God than those maps of Israel's sacred spaces allowed.

The author of Hebrews looks back and says those people couldn't even enter the earthly copy of the holy of holies, let alone enter heaven itself, the real holy of holies where God's presence isn't just kind of symbolized but is fully realized. Why? The author says rather strikingly in 10:4, it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Now, that is a striking declaration to make when scripture, Leviticus 17:11, says the life of the flesh is in the blood.

I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar, for as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. But the author looks historically at the practice of the Jewish people and notices that these sacrifices happen again and again and again, and nothing changes for the people. He looks at the repetition of the animal sacrifices, especially on the annual day of atonement, and he suggests that the repetition itself betrays their ineffectiveness, or else, he asks rhetorically, would they not have ceased to be offered? Also, though, he makes this bold assertion because the pollution that needed most to be removed was a matter of the human conscience, hence beyond the reach of what the author considered to be rights good only for external cleansing, and a matter of the defacing of the heavenly holy of holies, hence beyond the reach of the Levitical high priests.

So, everything that happened in the day of atonement rights in the tabernacle in the wilderness or in the temple in Jerusalem was kind of a model and prefiguration of what needed to happen to make decisive cleansing on behalf of the people. Hence, the author concludes in 9:23, it was necessary then for the copies of the holy places in the heavens, the copies being the earthly tabernacle, to be cleansed with such things as the blood of bulls and goats, but the heavenly places themselves needed to be cleansed with better sacrifices than these. Hence, the death of Jesus is what he will put forward as that which effects that cleansing.

Moreover, the author suggests that the Levitical priests themselves were insufficient for the task. The author's starting point here is again a general principle that

undergirds the Jerusalem temple cult. And here I read from Hebrews 5:1 that every high priest taken from among human beings is appointed on behalf of human beings in regard to the things pertaining to God.

But the high priest's own liability to sin requires that he first offers sacrifices to deal with his own sins and those of his family before he can offer sins on behalf of the people. This is a prominent feature of the daily offerings and also the day of atonement offerings as the descriptions, or I should say the prescriptions for the same, in Leviticus show. The first animal sacrificed is for the sins of the priest, not the sins of the people.

Jesus, however, being without sin and hence without any pollution in himself, is a qualitatively better mediator. He is established as a priest or mediator, however, not on the basis of genealogy, not because he comes from that tribe that was set apart from the other tribes to be holier to the Lord, the tribe of Levi, but rather he is established as a priest on the basis of an indestructible life. And here, of course, the author is thinking about his resurrection from the dead.

The author has just swung a theological hammer at the foundations of Israel's internal lines of differentiation and hierarchy, the differentiation of Levi from the rest of the Israelites and, within that, the priestly clans within the family of Levi. Now, the author looks at Jesus' death as an act that consecrates the people, that takes people who are common, and makes them holy so that they can have access to God that only the consecrated priests and even the consecrated high priest once enjoyed, and even more beyond. And so, he interprets Jesus' death and obedience to God and Jesus' ascension into heaven as carrying the significance of a cosmic day of atonement right.

Now, hopefully, you'll go on and read Hebrews 7 through 10 and think about it in these terms as you do so. Don't lose sight of the fact that the author is using this language, this ritual template, the day of atonement as an interpretative framework for a crucifixion and its aftermath. And thus, you know, it seems that we should not make the author's metaphors something more concrete.

We should not imagine Jesus actually entering heaven itself with a basin of his own blood. It's not the material substance that matters. It's Jesus' obedience to God unto death that matters and has this consecrating effect.

But the author of Hebrews, his metaphors and his interpretation have power and explanatory force only because of the power and force of purity codes and rights of purification and rights of sanctification in the ancient world. Now even though we'll be slightly redundant in regard to some of the things I've said already, I want to look here at the mechanics of the day of atonement ritual itself as found in Leviticus 16, and then what the author of Hebrews makes of it as a framework for thinking about

Jesus' death and ascension. So, on the day of atonement, on Yom Kippur, a number of acts happen in a particular order.

First, and I'll leave some things out; otherwise, I might as well just read Leviticus 16 to you. First, the high priest undergoes a ritual washing, an immersion into water that deals with pollution. Then the high priest offers a bull for his own sins and the sins of his house.

He takes the blood of this bull into the Holy of Holies and he sprinkles the blood of the bull on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant seven times. Then he presents two goats before the Lord and he casts lots over them and on the one on whom this lot falls, he sacrifices that one, he kills that one, and takes some of its blood again into the Holy of Holies and again sprinkles the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, which is also known as the mercy seat. The lid of the Ark of the Covenant is basically where God sits over, the base of his throne in that place.

So, he sprinkles the Ark of the Covenant again with the blood of this goat. Then he lays hands on the other goat, the living goat, and he symbolically transfers to that goat all the sins of the whole people of Israel. And then he sends that goat out into the desert to belong to Azazel, in effect, to die.

The important thing, though, is that the goat, in its wanderings, takes the sins and the pollution of the people away from the people, away from the camp. And, of course, then later, away from the settled places of Israel. Then, the high priest performs another ritual washing.

After all that is over, and he offers some part of the bull and some part of the first goat as a burnt offering, at least the fat is offering. I have to admit that in my reading, Leviticus is a bit unclear at this point, but I'm not a scholar of Leviticus.

The remains of these animals, then, are taken outside of the camp and they are completely devoured by fire. They are completely taken care of outside of the camp. Notice that according to this ritual, both the people and the inner sanctum, the holy of holies, require purification from sins.

Hence the two goats. The latter, the purification of the holy of holies, dramatically represents the affront, the defilement, and therefore the threat that sin among the people out there in the land presents to the presence of the holy God in their midst. Now this all becomes the framework for the author of Hebrew's interpretation of the crucifixion and ascension of Jesus.

And as I've already mentioned, he speaks of and presumes the resurrection. It's just that the resurrection itself doesn't really factor into Hebrews 9 and 10 per se. So, it doesn't play a part in this cosmic version of this ritual.

The first noteworthy thing is the lack of the need on the part of this priest to offer sacrifices for his own sins. We read in Hebrews 7 that 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.

For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness and hence need to make sacrifices for their own sins. But the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a son who has been made perfect forever. Then, that's kind of a point of non-correlation because Jesus doesn't have to do what the high priests had to do in regard to that first animal, the bull, that was offered for the priest's own sins.

Then, the author of Hebrews talks about Jesus' death outside the city. He finds it relevant that the place of crucifixion wasn't inside the camp, but was outside the camp as it were. And he draws this parallel in chapter 13.

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. So, we have that parallel where Jesus, in effect, takes upon himself the role of that goat that was slaughtered for the sins of the people.

But also, we're not just dealing with the sins, sorry, the stain of sin on our conscience. We're also dealing with the pollution of sin in God's presence. And so, the author of Hebrews looks at Jesus' entry into heaven as part of this ritual complex, as he writes in chapter 9, verses 11 and 12.

When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, that is not made with hands, not of this creation, he entered once for all into the holy place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. And again, in Hebrews 9, 23 to 24, the author writes about the sprinkling of the blood of the bull and the goat on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. He writes that it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves, God's real holy of holies beyond the visible heavens, need better sacrifices than these.

For 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. There's even a bit of an integration of the second coming into this ritual because, of course, the high priest would reemerge from the holy places, and that reemergence would signal the effective conclusion and achievement of the rites of

the day of atonement. And so also Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, will come back out of the heavenly holy of holies, will come back and appear a second time not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Jesus' obedience on behalf of his followers thereby affects a complete purification such that his followers are now, and this is the stellar achievement, his followers now are made fit to cross not merely the threshold into the holy of holies in Jerusalem, because that's just a model, that doesn't count, but to cross the threshold into the holy of holies in heaven itself and thereby to enjoy God's presence forever. And so the author writes, therefore, I'm sorry this is chapter 10, verse 19 and following, therefore brothers and sisters, 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, having washed the hearts from a wicked conscience and having washed the body with clean water. There's what seems to me to be an obvious reference to baptism in this paragraph, which plays some role in applying purification to the individual Christian, just as the high priest had to perform a ritual immersion before entering the copy of the holy of holies.

In Christ, access to God is no longer hedged by pollution taboos and impassable lines but becomes a festive homecoming in which many sons and daughters may enter their father's house in heaven itself. For now, it is the Christian's hope that enters into the inner side of the curtain where Jesus entered as a forerunner on our behalf, and that image from Hebrews 6 imagines that we have a kind of tether in the heavenly holy of holies, and that tether is our hope, our connection to Jesus, our pioneer, our forerunner who has gone there on our behalf. As the believers continue on in their journey of faith, rather than shrink back, they themselves are getting closer and closer to the threshold of heaven itself, over which they have been made fit to cross through Jesus' consecrating sacrifice.

And so, like the patronage and reciprocity scripts that we explored earlier in our fourth lecture, the purity and sacrificial language also impels the hearers forward in the path of discipleship to the goal against the force of their neighbor's resistance. This is also reflected in the fact that forsaking the assembling of yourselves together is now defined as sinning willfully, for which, and here again, the author accepts and uses the assumptions of the Torah's purity codes, for which there is no offering for sins. Particular practices now are promoted by the author as acts that have value for the relationship between God and God's people.

Obviously, any of the Levitical sacrifices no longer have value because they have all been superseded and transcended in the one sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. Nevertheless, as a consecrated people, the disciples are now in a position to offer a kind of priestly service, and to offer acts that become the new medium of exchange between God and God's people. So, we read in Hebrews 13, Through him then,

through Jesus then, let us always offer to God the sacrifice of praise, the sacrifice that consists in praise, that is, the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

Let us not forget to do good or to share, for with sacrifices of this kind, God is well pleased. So, the author leaves his audience, his consecrated audience, who are now ready, whenever the day comes, to enter into heaven itself, God's real holy of holies. He leaves them with this priestly duty, as it were, to continue to bear witness to Christ in the midst of a potentially hostile world and to continue to offer to one another acts of love and service, for these things taken together are the sacrifices, are the language of exchange that has meaning now for God on this side of Jesus.

Our explorations, both of the historic purity and pollution codes and of Hebrews, not to mention the Pauline mission more generally, might lead us to re-examine purity lines today. And on the one hand, they challenge us to transcend certain lines. We either live out, or we refuse to live out, the conviction that all who have trusted in Christ are one body in Christ.

Avoiding pollution is a defensive strategy for protecting cleanness or holiness, but Jesus himself redefined how we are to mirror God's holiness. It is no longer a matter of being holy, and therefore abstaining from certain pollutions completely, and being on guard against the polluted people, for I am holy, but now it is merciful as your Father is merciful. And that is a very different strategy.

That is a strategy of extending kindness as a means of mirroring God's essential character. You can see from the syntax that it is a transformation of Leviticus 11. Be holy, for I am holy.

Be merciful, for I am merciful. The transformation of Israel's maps of purity and pollution in the ministry of Jesus and in the movement that he birthed challenges us to examine our own, our societies, and our nation's maps of clean and unclean, maps of insiders and outsiders, and not to allow those lines, or those maps, to trump God's vision for one new humanity in Christ. At the same time, there are lines to keep observing.

The body of Christ is holy. It has been cleansed and sanctified for the enormous privilege of intimate interaction with the holy God. Only a deep appreciation for the power and the danger of the holy, and the care with which it was approached in the ancient world, can set us up for a proportional appreciation of what Jesus accomplished for us in his death, ascension, and sending of the Holy Spirit upon us.

But now that we have been thus consecrated, and with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit set upon us, we are challenged to keep walking in line with this cleansing, and to protect the holiness of the body of Christ. How are we guided to do this? Well, New Testament texts direct us to protect the holiness of Christ's body from the pollution

of internal dissension, power plays, or other tears in the fabric of Christ's body. To protect it from the pollution of the world's practices, values, and goals insofar as these get in the way of God's righteous vision for God's people and for the world as a whole.

And, of course, to protect the holiness of Christ's body from the pollution of our own misconduct, where we are tempted to follow the drives of the passions and desires that lead us to transgress God's standards of holiness and righteousness. In sum, attention to the cultural world in which the early church, its convictions, its practices, and its writings took shape does more than lead us to a more authentic hearing of those texts. It also leads us to the possibility of a more authentic following of those texts as we consider how they challenge our own cultural assumptions, our own cultural practices and the way these have limited our embodiment of God's vision for God's people.

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