

The Cultural World of the New Testament

Session 7: Purity and Pollution

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. David deSilva examines the ancient concepts of purity and pollution as a comprehensive system of cosmic order in ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism. Rather than modern medical or hygienic concerns, these regulations functioned as social and theological maps organizing people, space, time, food, and bodies in relation to the holy presence of God. Purity represented maintaining boundaries and keeping everything in its divinely ordained place, while pollution was the crossing of these boundaries, which required ritual purifications to avoid provoking divine wrath. Ultimately, these codes reinforced Jewish ethnic identity and served as visceral, outward reflections of a holistic commitment to a holy God.

Outline

I. Introduction: Modern Obstacles to Reading Leviticus

- A. Western and Protestant assumptions of ritual law as outmoded, legalistic, or externalistic
- B. Loss of the sense of the power and danger of the Holy
 - 1. Ancient view represented by Isaiah 6 (awareness of pollution in God's presence, fear of vaporization)
 - 2. Relegation of approaching the holy to professional priests
- C. The role of Christ's work in transcending and clarifying the old arrangements and their rationales

II. Modern Analogies for Understanding Purity and Pollution

- A. Concept of "dirt" as soil out of place
 - 1. Normal and proper in the garden or outdoors
 - 2. Considered a defilement on driveways and unacceptable on living room carpets
- B. Personal dietary rules and food-handling taboos
 - 1. Culturally conditioned choices (e.g., eating beef vs. dog or cat in America)
 - 2. Visceral revulsion at out-of-place food (e.g., food on a driveway vs. kitchen counter or living room carpet)
- C. Social boundaries and hygiene dynamics

1. Varying reactions to sickness and bodily fluids (e.g., germaphobes vs. casual attitudes to handshakes)
 2. Social consequences of cleanliness rules (e.g., avoiding eating at homes with lower food hygiene)
 3. Homeless persons viewed as "displaced"—lacking a proper place in the social order
- D. Temporal and spatial boundaries
1. Intrusion of professional business calls in personal home life
 2. Intrusion of personal, private matters in the workplace

III. The Ancient Logic of Purity and Pollution

- A. Rejection of modern medical and hygienic rationalizations
1. Avoidance of pork or lobster was not driven by modern concerns over microbes, disease, or trichinosis
 2. Jewish martyrs preferred death over violating dietary laws, which transcends health logic
- B. Purity as a divinely ordained cosmic order
1. Conceptualized as "a place for everything and everything in its place"
 2. Pollution represents moving out of place, crossing boundaries, and cosmic decay
- C. Holiness as set apart, whole, complete, and charged with dangerous power
1. God's presence cannot tolerate pollution
 2. Dangerous interaction between the unclean and the holy compared to matter and antimatter
- D. Purification rites as processes for containing and eliminating unavoidable pollution
- E. Universality of purity concerns across the ancient Mediterranean world (e.g., Greek and Roman shrine inscriptions)

IV. The Categorical Framework of Leviticus 10:10

- A. The primary priestly function: distinguishing categories and teaching statutes
- B. The First Pair: Holy vs. Common (Profane)
1. Common/Profane: Ordinary, secular, neutral, accessible to all
 2. Holy: Meaning-charged, set apart from the ordinary, belonging exclusively to God
- C. The Second Pair: Clean vs. Unclean
1. Clean: Neutral, normal state; that which is whole, intact, and in its proper place
 2. Unclean: Meaning-charged, dangerous state of pollution; crossing a boundary
- D. Interactions of categories in daily practice
1. Lay Israelites: Normally clean and common, temporarily unclean and common (e.g., menstruation, nocturnal emission)
 2. Marketplace food: Jewish markets (clean and common) vs. Gentile markets (unclean and common due to idols or improper slaughter)
 3. Tithes: Clean and holy (e.g., reserved exclusively for priests)
 4. Graveyard: Unclean and common
 5. Temple precincts: Clean and holy
- E. Seamless integration of moral and ritual law in ancient Judaism

1. Leviticus 19:18-19 juxtaposes moral commandments ("love your neighbor") with ritual rules (not mixing seed, breeding different kinds, or mixing clothing fabrics)
2. The same "guilt offering" addressed both moral fraud in business and ritual contact with an unclean source

V. Early Judaism's Purity Maps

A. Maps of People

1. External boundary: Israelite (de facto clean and chosen) vs. Gentile (de facto unclean and off the map)
2. Bodily marking: Circumcision as an inscriptional sign of covenantal set-apartness
3. Internal hierarchy of holiness: Lay Israelites (clean/common) -> Tribe of Levi (temple structure service) -> Priests (altar and sanctuary access) -> High Priest (access to Holy of Holies)

B. Maps of Space (The Temple Complex)

1. Court of the Gentiles: Open to all nations, containing Greek warning inscriptions threatening encroachers with death
2. Court of Israelite Women: Closer access than non-Israelites
3. Court of Israelite Men (Laity): Closer physical access
4. Sanctuary Proper: Composed of the Court of Priests, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies
5. Holy of Holies: The intersection of divine and human realms, accessed only by the High Priest once a year
6. Danger of Encroachment: Crossing boundary of set-apartness is fatal (e.g., Heliodorus in 2 Maccabees)
7. Holiness of the Land: Canaanites expelled for pollution; Israel threatened with being "vomited out" if defilement accumulates

C. Maps of Time

1. The Sabbath (the Seventh Day): Holy time of rest mirroring God's cosmic rest, serving as an essential Jewish identity marker
2. Sacred Calendar: Annual pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Pentecost, Booths)

D. Maps of Food

1. Land animals: Clean if ruminating (chewing the cud) AND having split hooves (e.g., pigs are unclean for lacking ruminating)
2. Sea creatures: Clean if possessing BOTH fins and scales (e.g., lobsters unclean due to water-dwelling but walking like land animals)
3. Avoidance of blood: Ingestion strictly prohibited because life/blood belongs exclusively to God for atonement
4. Food distributions: Portions strictly divided to reinforce social hierarchy (God, priests, and lay offerers)
5. Social function: Restricting shared meals with Gentiles to maintain ethnic and covenantal boundaries, leading to Jewish-only markets and close-knit diaspora communities

E. Maps of the Body

1. Focus on physical surfaces (skin, clothing) and orifices

2. Intactness vs. permeability: Skin diseases (leprosy) and bodily fluid emissions (menstruation, nocturnal emissions) represent boundaries crossing and symbolic passage to death
3. Mary Douglas's "Purity and Danger": The physical body as a bounded system modeling the social boundary of the Israelite community

VI. Managing Pollution

- A. Pollution as natural, routine, and unavoidable (e.g., menstruation, burying relatives)
- B. Focus on containing and dispelling pollution via purification rites, preventing cumulative defilement
- C. Corporate impact: Individual pollutions drift and defile the Holy of Holies, requiring annual cleansing on the Day of Atonement
- D. Unpardonable pollutions (no sacrificial redress; results in the destruction of the polluted)
 1. Wilful delays of purification, idolatry, murder, Sabbath breaking, incest, and bestiality

VII. Theological Reinterpretations in Second Temple Diaspora Judaism

- A. Mirroring God's cosmic choice: Distinguishing clean/unclean mirrors Israel's separation from the nations
- B. Allegorical moralizing of dietary laws (e.g., Letter of Aristeas - avoiding birds of prey like vultures teaches not preying on the weak)
- C. Physical training in virtue (e.g., 4 Maccabees - abstaining from pork training the soul in self-control and curbing passions)

VIII. Levels of Purity Concern in Society

- A. Center-oriented scaling: The closer to the Temple, the greater the demand for purity (e.g., priestly corpse restrictions vs. Tobit's praise for burying laymen)
- B. Secondary pollution: Pollution through indirect contact (Pharisees' unique concern with secondary pollution to maintain strict sectarian boundaries and table fellowship)
- C. Summary: Purity as a holistic synthesis of clean hands and a pure heart, reflecting core internal convictions and obedience to God in an unclean world