

Reading Hebrews Attuned to Purity and Pollution

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Hebrews, purity, pollution, High Priest, tabernacle, Day of Atonement, sacrifice, sanctification, conscience, Levitical

Abstract

Dr. David deSilva examines the Letter to the Hebrews through the lens of ancient purity and pollution systems, arguing that the text redefines sacred boundaries for a community rooted in the Pauline mission. He explains how the author of Hebrews transcends traditional Israelite purity maps of spaces and personnel by presenting Jesus as the ultimate High Priest whose self-offering achieves an internal cleansing of the human conscience. Consequently, believers are consecrated and granted direct, unmediated access into the heavenly sanctuary, moving from external ritual compliance to a lived reality of spiritual holiness and active service.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Lecture and the Context of Hebrews

A. Connection to the Pauline Mission

1. Suggested by the closing reference to Timothy (Hebrews 13:23)
2. Indicates ongoing coordination among members of Paul's team

B. Question of Authorship

1. Distinct from Paul himself; the author claims to have received the word through others' preaching
2. Contrast with Paul's adamant claims of direct revelation (e.g., in Galatians)

II. Redefining Purity Maps of People in the Pauline Mission

A. Setting Aside the Jew-Gentile Boundary

1. Pauline theology asserts the division belongs to the past (Romans, Galatians)
2. Breaking down the dividing wall to create one new humanity (Ephesians 2:14-15)

B. The Witness of the Holy Spirit

1. Converters received shared distributions of the Holy Spirit
2. Giving of the Spirit to both groups on equal terms transcends old purity codes

C. Rejection of Dietary Regulations and Calendar Markers

1. Food restrictions set aside to enable shared table fellowship (Galatians 2:11-14)
2. General principle that everything is good and sanctified by prayer (1 Timothy 4:4-5)

3. Caution remains only around food sacrificed to idols to preserve the boundary with paganism
4. Weekly Sabbath observance replaced by the concept of an eternal Sabbath rest in the heavenly realm (Hebrews 4:9-11)

D. The New Line of Demarcation

1. Boundary shifts from Jew vs. Gentile to Christian vs. non-Christian
2. Believers are collectively called 'saints' (holy ones) set apart for God

III. Redefining Purity Maps of Spaces and Personnel

A. The Graded Access of the Earthly Tabernacle

1. Under the old covenant, access to God was strictly limited by spatial and human boundaries
2. Laypeople were barred from the inner sanctuaries; only priests could cross specific boundaries

B. Earthly Spaces as Copies of the Heavenly Reality

1. The desert tabernacle made according to the heavenly pattern shown to Moses on the mountain (Exodus 25:40)
2. The physical temple serves as a secondary, symbolic copy of the true sanctuary where God dwells
3. Decisively effective mediation must occur in heaven itself, not in the earthly copy

C. The Ineffectiveness of the Levitical Sacrificial System

1. Repetitive animal sacrifices (e.g., Day of Atonement) prove their ongoing inability to remove sin
2. Inherent limitation: blood of bulls and goats cannot remove sins (Hebrews 10:4)
3. Focus on external cleansing rather than internal purification of the human conscience

D. The Inadequacy of the Levitical Priestly Order

1. High priests chosen from weak humans, requiring sacrifices for their own sins first (Leviticus 16)
2. Priestly lineage was based on physical genealogy (tribe of Levi)

E. Jesus as the Qualitatively Better Mediator

1. Established as a priest not by lineage, but by the power of an indestructible life (resurrection)
2. Perfectly sinless and obedient, removing any need to offer sacrifices for Himself
3. Replaces internal lines of differentiation and priestly hierarchies

IV. The Cosmic Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) in Hebrews

A. The Traditional Ritual Template (Leviticus 16)

1. High priest cleanses himself, offers a bull for his own sins, and sprinkles blood on the Mercy Seat

2. Two goats: one sacrificed for the people's sins, and the other (scapegoat) sent to the wilderness to remove pollution
3. Remains of sacrificial animals burned completely outside the camp
4. Represents spatial and ritual cleansing of both the inner sanctum and the community

B. Jesus' Perfect Alignment with and Transcendence of Yom Kippur

1. Crucifixion outside the city gate corresponds to the burning of sacrificial remains outside the camp
2. Jesus offers His own blood, acting as the ultimate, unpolluted sacrifice
3. Ascension into heaven is interpreted as entering the real, heavenly Holy of Holies to appear before God
4. Reemergence from the sanctuary (Second Coming) will signal the final, effective completion of salvation

C. Internal vs. External Purification

1. Levitical rites targeted the cleanness of the flesh (external pollution)
2. Jesus' sacrifice acts as a 'deep down' spiritual cleanser, purifying the conscience from dead works

V. Practical Consequences of the Redeemed Purity Map

A. Direct and Bold Access to God

1. Believers have boldness to cross ancient boundaries and enter the heavenly Holy of Holies
2. Spiritual cleansing symbolized/applied through baptism ('body washed with clean water')
3. Believers anchored in the divine realm through a tether of hope connected to Jesus as forerunner

B. New Priestly Service and Sacrifices

1. Outward temple rituals are superseded by the singular offering of Christ
2. Believers offer new sacrifices: praise (lips professing His name), doing good, and sharing

C. Challenging Contemporary Boundaries

1. Moving from defensive strategies (avoiding pollution) to mirroring God's character through mercy
2. Transformation of Leviticus 11: 'Be holy, for I am holy' becomes 'Be merciful, as your Father is merciful'
3. Obligation to protect the holiness of Christ's body from internal dissension, worldly practices, and personal misconduct