

STUDY QUESTIONS

The Reverend Helen McPeak

Grounded in his lifelong respect for and wrestling with the Bible, Kevin A. Wilson brings both professorial and parenting experience into play as he seeks to bring the Law more naturally into conversations with the daily life of faith. With a strong critical mind and clear commitment to continuing the dialogue, he offers straightforward information about the biblical laws which calls us to reclaim and seek wisdom in this part of our scriptural canon.

Introduction

Before you begin, think about how you experience laws in your life (e.g. laws of physics, traffic laws, family rules, religious laws, school rules, civil laws, etc.). What roles do laws play?

Pray together for God's guidance and support in this study you are beginning.

- What are your hopes for this learning?
- Why do you engage it now?
- How will you open yourself to receive what God will give?

What is your understanding of the Law in Scripture?

- How were you introduced to the Law?
- What role does it play in your life at this time?

Where is the Law a blessing? Where a curse?

THE LAW

What is your working definition of the Law?

- Is it an “official set of rules”? Is it “instruction”?
- List the eight synonyms Psalm 119 uses to convey the idea of *torah*.

Do you agree with Wilson’s assertion that “Except for the Ten Commandments, Christians don’t pay much attention to the Laws of the Pentateuch” (p. xvii)? Why or why not?

What has been passed to you orally from parents, teachers, grandparents, friends, neighbors, ministers, etc.? What came through non-verbally?

The people of Israel found definition of their identity in the narratives and legal texts of the Pentateuch. What sources define your identity corporately? Individually?

What familiarity do you have with the sources J, E, D, and P and research on Documentary Hypothesis? If this is one, what other hypotheses exist?

Wilson explains the rhythm he will use to lead us through this study: a look at the text, presentation of some background information, then rationale behind the laws and the way they functioned in the life of ancient Israel. He invites us to come with expectation for some contemporary application. What in your experience with scripture supports this expectation? What hinders it?

Chapter One: The Ten Commandments

Quick, before you look: Can you name all ten of the commandments? (No peeking!) Write them down.

What were you taught about the Ten Commandments as a child? How were you taught? Has this approach changed over time?

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Revisit Wilson's comparison of Exodus 20:1–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21. What do you observe about the delivery? The date?

Wilson writes that “in the centuries prior to [the completion of Exodus], the contents of the Ten Commandments may have been in flux” (p. 3).

- How does this affect your view of the biblical story of the Ten Commandments?
- Is it difficult for you to let go of your image of God's hand handing down the stone tablets as the first delivery of these ideas?

Read Exodus 34:17–26, Leviticus 19:1–19, and Deuteronomy 27:15–26. What themes and generalities do you see in these Decalogue-like formations?

Wilson writes, “the Ten Commandments deal primarily with the overarching ideas concerning how the people are to relate to God and to others” (p. 5). He further suggests some reasons why the Ten Commandments were selected to serve as the center of Israelite law. Revisit this discussion.

- To what is the Decalogue not tied?
- Why is this relevant?
- What focus arose from this freedom?

Wilson writes that the Ten Commandments are not so named in Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5 (p. 5–6).

- How might you title this set of laws?
- What difference does it make?

Discuss the difference in emphases Wilson highlights between Anglicans (and many others in the Reformed tradition) and Roman Catholics and Lutherans (p. 6). Why do you suppose this difference abides?

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Wilson writes that “interpersonal relationships must be seen in the light of our relation to the divine” (p. 6). Give some examples of this illumination in your own life, your community.

Wilson explores the statement that God is “a jealous God punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me” (Exodus 20:5).

- With which of the explanations offered do you more closely resonate?
- What other interpretations come to mind?

Reexamine the two rationales for the Sabbath from Deuteronomy and Exodus highlighted by Wilson (p. 10).

- Explore the interplay between the two.
- Which motivates you?
- How do you follow the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy?

Which Commandment most engages your attention at this time?

- With what do you struggle?
- How has your relationship the Law evolved over time?

Revisit Wilson’s discussion of the final six commandments (p. 11–15).

- How might these apply in life today?
- Where do we expand the Commandments?
- Where do we limit the original intention (e.g. capital punishment, unfaithful spouses, inheritance, retention of property, honesty, inner disposition, etc.)?

So what?

- How does your deepened intellectual understanding of these basic requirements of the life of faith call you to action?
- What will you do differently because you are engaging in this study?

Chapter Two: The Law in Exodus

Review the four sections of the Law as defined by Fretheim that Wilson cites. In what ways does this division “keep the law firmly rooted in the life of the people” (p. 20)?

Wilson states, “Woven into the cloth of [the Exodus story], the law isn’t divine directive imposed on the people from outside, but part of the same plan as the deliverance from Egypt and the covenant at Sinai: God has called a people for his own” (p. 20).

- How does the law interweave with the salvation of Israel from Egypt?
- How does the law interweave with the whole salvation history?

Revisit Wilson’s discussions of the origins of the Covenant Code content (p. 20).

- Who is most likely responsible for this code?
- When does it become a part of the people’s history?
- How important are these details of origin to your relationship with the code?

Wilson calls our attention to the division of the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21:1–23:19) into two sections: *casuistic* and *apodictic*.

- Where else do you find these words defined? Explore their definitions.
- Play with them. Write your own examples of each type. Make up a chant to help you remember.
- Which type do you prefer?

Read the Covenant Code (Exodus 20:22–23:33). Wilson suggests that “the fact that these two laws are included within the covenant-making process itself points to the importance that they had in ancient Israel as well as the centrality biblical authors ascribe to them” (p. 22).

- What is your initial reaction to these laws?
- Why do you suppose this “collection of rules” is given such importance?

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In the midst of some arbitrary and obscure laws (e.g. 21:7 and 23:5) lie some laws which have become central to contemporary understanding of God's expectations (e.g. *lex talionis*: 21:23–25 and 22:21–27).

- How do you discern the most appropriate application of particular laws in your own life?

How do you respond to Wilson's comments that "the text goes into great—almost excruciating—detail, and these are not the most exciting chapters in the book of Exodus" (p. 26)?

- How much time do you give to this "topic to which the Scriptures give so much space"? Why?

Go ahead! Watch *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

- Look at the model of the ark as Wilson suggests.
- Sketch it.
- Model it with Play-Doh.
- What do you notice?

Try to make sense of the text in Exodus 26–27.

- Sketch the layout of the tabernacle and accoutrements as described in the Bible.
- Where would you be allowed to stand?
- How might it feel to worship in his space?

Wilson asks, "How can we use the laws in Exodus for life within the Church today?" Good question!

- Review Wilson's explanation of the historical and theological difficulties (p. 28–29).
- What suggestions does he offer for claiming the value of these Scriptures?
- What patterns of life are put forth by the law?

Wilson states, "Within the faith community, everything is within God's purview" (p. 32).

- Into what areas of your life do you invite God?
- Which areas do you prefer to handle alone?

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- Where is God most visible in your community?
- Where is God most needed?

What in your life has been akin to building the tabernacle, both in terms of demanding detailed attention and in terms of supporting your nearness to God?

Chapter Three: Sacrifices in Leviticus

In the broadest sense of the word, what sacrifices have you made in your life?

- What motivated your sacrifice?
- How do you feel when making an offering to God?

Read Leviticus 1–7.

- Name the offerings listed in v. 7:37.

Wilson offers a list of things to note in studying these offerings (p. 34).

- Review this list

Wilson writes, “Animals with some kind of defect were not acceptable offerings, for a perfect God requires perfect sacrifices” (p. 35; see also the need for temple holiness on p. 38). How has this idea evolved to the point where we now offer to God a “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving” (Eucharistic Prayer C, Book of Common Prayer, p. 371)?

What explanations have you encountered for the placing of the offerand’s hands on the animal to be sacrificed?

- Why is this important?
- What assumptions are made about offerings in your own worship?

Wilson distinguishes the Israelite idea of sacrifice from those of the cultures around them (p. 36). What point is made in this distinction?

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Wilson reminds us, “So any time the people wanted to eat meat, they had to offer a sacrifice” (p. 38).

- Compare this with your own experience of meat in your diet today.
- What facet of health is emphasized in each model?

Having read these laws regarding specific parts of animals, what will you do?

- Will you continue to eat liver and kidney pie?
- Will you enjoy paté and gravy?
- Why? How will you decide?

Wilson discussed the concept that God “cannot dwell in an impure place” (p. 38).

- What would happen when the temple became unfit for God’s presence?
- How powerful would this motivation be in your own religious practice?

Compare and contrast methods of confession and absolution today with methods of acknowledgment of unintentional sin and purification described in this chapter.

- What beliefs are reflected?
- What roles are elucidated?

Wilson writes, “We often think of the Old Testament sacrificial system as an arrangement that worked fine until Jesus came, but became unnecessary once he arrived . . . (though this) doesn’t do justice to the purpose and place of offerings in the life of ancient Israel” (p. 42).

- Revisit his description of why the majority of sacrifices were offered.
- Why is ritual important?
- What parallels do you find between the worship of the ancient Israelites and our own? (Wilson names 3.)

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Wilson asserts, “The perils of corporate sins outweigh those of individual misdeeds” (p. 44–45).

- What examples of corporate sin today can you name?
- What one step are you willing to take toward returning the community to right relationship with God?

Explore the tensions between the ideas of Leviticus 1–7 as Wilson develops them and such passages as Mark 2:17. What purity is required of us in today’s understanding in our interaction with God?

Chapter Four: The Law in Leviticus

Jot down in your own words a definition of “holiness.”

Revisit the two extremes Wilson names between which we are to use the Law in a theologically helpful way (pp. 49–50). Toward which do you more often lean?

Wilson calls our attention to the 39 Articles of Religion established in the United States in 1801 (BCP, p. 867ff). These 200-year-old American Articles may feel as distant as their 435-year-old originals or as the 2,500-year-old laws of ancient Israel.

- What wisdom do you glean from perusing them?
- What role does external authority play in your faith life?

Studying law in community can be an act of faith.

- What reactions do you have to such laws Wilson highlights as the law about which water creatures may be eaten; or the simple existence of, as well as the different durations of, ritual uncleanness of a woman following childbirth of a male or female child; or the laws governing mildew?
- What impact do these laws have on your life?

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Stepping back from the individual points of the Holiness Code allows us to regain focus on its unifying theme of holiness: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

- How do the individual points support or distract from this theme?
- What reasons does Wilson give for its importance?

Wilson offers new ways of looking at Leviticus (pp. 56–59). Revisit these.

Explore his definition of holiness (p. 56).

- How does it compare with what you wrote down as you began to study this chapter?
- What patterns of living emerge from Leviticus to bring you into closer relationship with God?

Wilson, an expert on the Old Testament, writes, “Only as a whole is the Bible a sufficient witness to God’s actions, and when we don’t treat it as a whole we skew our perspective of God (p. 58).

- How do these particular specialized insights draw you more deeply into the presence of God in your daily faith journey?
- For what does this knowledge better equip you?

As Wilson explores the continuity of covenants, what similarities and differences does he articulate (p. 58)? What helps you to truly comprehend the reality of God’s action in lives both in ancient times and in the here and now?

Wilson writes, “It’s far too easy to become so at home with the Bible that it never challenges us” (p. 59).

- In your experience, is this danger real? Why?
- How is this study supporting the Bible’s challenge to you?

Chapter Five: The Law in Numbers

What are the largest groups of laws Wilson delineates for us in Numbers? How are they distributed?

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Wilson writes, “Although the tabernacle at the center of the encampment symbolized God’s place at the center of their communal life, the holiness of the tabernacle was a danger to the people” (p. 65).

- What in modern life can you think of that is also central and dangerous?
- Who are the “priests” of these things?

In what ways did the Levites serve as a substitution (p. 66)?

- What did God accept from them?
- In place of what?
- Who serves that function today?

What assumptions underlie the laws concerning women in Numbers?

- How do you respond to the point Wilson makes that “unlike in some societies, the woman is not automatically considered guilty” (p. 66)?
- Upon what does the value lie in the examples of the daughters of Zelophehad?

In discussing *nazarites*, Wilson comments, “the precise purpose of each rule isn’t always clear” and “the purpose for taking such a vow isn’t (clear).”

- What explanations can you imagine for these laws?
- What role have vows, lifelong or temporary, played in your own life?

Revisit Wilson’s exploration of the applications Levitical laws have within the Church today (pp. 70–72).

- How might study of the law undergird the sense of holiness and reverence with which such service is performed?
- What are the possibilities for nazarite-type service available today?
- How could an entire congregation be involved?

In what ministries are you currently engaged which serve the world, the altar, or both? How does this study encourage and challenge you?

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Chapter Six: The Law in Deuteronomy

What difference does Wilson cite as one enters the book of Deuteronomy after Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers? Familiarize yourself with Source Theory, Documentary Hypothesis, using exegetical resources.

In what way is Deuteronomy a misnomer?

- When in history does this book of law make an appearance?
- What effects does the discovery of this book have?
- What similarities does Wilson highlight between the laws in Deuteronomy and those in Exodus through Numbers?

Revisit the Decalogue as you read Wilson's exploration of Braulik's and Wright's work corresponding the Decalogue and the law in Deuteronomy. What do you notice?

How is justice served by the cities of refuge described in Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19? What purpose do they serve? (For an interesting sidebar, compare and contrast this concept with that of the Cities of Asylum Network in our contemporary society.)

Wilson describes particular traits and foci of Deuteronomic laws governing worship. Revisit these laws (pp. 79–82).

- What important facets of worship are addressed?
- What are some key facets of your own worship today?

In exploring the Deuteronomic laws affecting the king, Wilson asserts that God interprets to Samuel the people's actions (p. 83).

- Review this interpretation.
- What are the results of the people's choice?

What criterion does Deuteronomy put forth for determining a true prophet (Deuteronomy 18:22)?

- What double bind might this bring?
- What criteria assist you in discerning the authenticity of prophets today?

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What guidelines regarding the making of war does Wilson elucidate in Deuteronomy? (How) might these laws be useful guidance today?

Wilson writes that “the Law in Deuteronomy is a rich field for the theological imagination (p. 87). He lists several examples.

- In what ways does the law in Deuteronomy stir your imagination?
- How is it for you to allow “the variety of voices within the text . . . each [to] speak individually without trying to enforce any kind of uniformity” (p. 88)?
- How much internal contradiction or variations of emphases can orthodoxy tolerate?
- How do you respond to “unity without uniformity” (p. 88)?

What “take-home message” do you find in this “rich tapestry through which God invites people to deeper relationship with the divine” (p. 89)?

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