



Tough Questions From Christian Teens

What About Old Testament Sexual Laws?

By

Mark McGee

Christian teens ask some tough questions. That's why we started this series more than two years ago. If you are a Christian teen or the parent or teacher of Christian teens, we invite you to [send questions to us](#).

Here is our next tough question.

Odd laws concerning adultery, rape, and marrying captives (Deuteronomy 21:13-14 and 22:28-29):

There seems to be no admonishment to take into consideration a captive woman's wishes when deciding to marry her; also, this seems to be an instance when divorce without reason is perfectly legal. Is this correct?

As for adultery and rape, I could not tell which the later passage was referring to. It being the Bible I would like to assume it means adultery (mutual consent) but without knowing any Hebrew I cannot tell for sure. Regardless it seems to be saying that adultery with an unengaged woman has no severe punishment, whereas gathering sticks on the

Sabbath day is punishable by death (Numbers 15:32-35). Is this correct? If so, how is it Just?

Great questions!

It's good for us to look at the Law of God in light of historical perspective from thousands of years ago.

God gave Noah and his family specific laws concerning how to live in the new world that would emerge after the global Flood.

“But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. ‘Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man. And as for you, be fruitful and multiply; Bring forth abundantly in the earth And multiply in it.’ Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: ‘And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ And God said: ‘This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every

living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ And God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.’ GENESIS 9:6-17

Prior to the Flood we see the total disregard of people for other people. They lived for hundreds of years and their wickedness led God to destroy most people and animals with water. Every intent of the thoughts of their hearts were “only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). The earth was “corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence” (Genesis 6:11-12). God looked upon the earth and saw that all flesh

had corrupted their way on the earth ... “for the earth is filled with violence through them.” (v 13)

Things changed dramatically after the Flood. Noah and his wife and their three sons and wives were the only people left alive on earth. When they departed the Ark and stood on dry ground for the first time after the Flood waters receded, Noah built an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings to God (Genesis 8:20).

Bringing offerings to God began soon after Adam and Eve sinned against God. The word ‘offering’ (minchah) means ‘a gift, tribute, offering’ and is also translated ‘sacrifice.’

“And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.” GENESIS 4:3-5

Cain's jealousy and anger led him to murder his brother. His mother, Eve, had another son and named him Seth. Eve, who was awaiting God's promise of a Seed who would destroy Satan, believed that God had given her Seth as the promised seed. Seth had a son, Enosh, and the Bible says – "Then men began to call on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 4:26).

The Hebrew word for 'call' is *qara* and means 'call, proclaim.' The worship of God began again through the family of Seth and Enosh. Noah was from that lineage and knew about making offerings and calling (proclaiming) on the name of the Lord.

The Apostle Peter wrote this about Noah – "... and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly" (2 Peter 2:5).

Noah continued what began with his ancestors Seth and Enosh. He ‘proclaimed’ righteousness. Noah did that as he built the Ark with his sons. We are told at the end of Genesis 5 that Noah was 500 years old when he and his wife began having sons. We are told in Genesis 7 that in “the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened” (Genesis 7:11).

We don’t know exactly how long it took for Noah and his sons to build the Ark, but it would certainly have taken many years .. possibly decades. During that time Noah’s neighbors would have certainly noticed what he and his sons were doing. The neighbors, like everyone else on earth at the time, were living their lives as if God did not exist or did not matter. Every intent of the thoughts of their hearts “was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). What did Noah do? He ‘proclaimed’ righteousness. He called on his neighbors to repent and do right according to what they knew to be right in God’s eyes. They all refused and died in the Flood.

After the Flood God was pleased with Noah's offering and said He would "never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done" (Genesis 8:21). God knew that even with the amazing demonstration of His power, people would continue sinning because their hearts were evil from their youth. That's when God commanded Noah and his family about violent behavior in the future.

"Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man." GENESIS 9:6

Murder had been a problem for hundreds of years. Cain killed Abel and one of Cain's descendants, Enoch, killed a man for wounding him. Enoch said – "If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (Genesis 4:24).

Murder was always wrong as we saw in how God responded to Cain when he was angry with his brother Abel –

“So the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.’” GENESIS 4:6-7

God identified anger and what it would lead to (murder) as sin. Murder was always wrong, but God added a consequence for it after the Flood. Murder became against God’s Law even as He reminded people about the high value of every human life.

“Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.” GENESIS 9:6

God gave the judicial 'death penalty' to humans. Who would make the decision about that? Other humans, but who would those people be who could decide who lived and who died?

We see evidence of how the commandments of God to Noah impacted the ancient world in some of the legal codes that have been discovered by archaeologists:

- The Code of Urukagina – 24th century BC
- The Code of Ur-Nammu – 22nd century BC (Abraham grew up in Ur during the 21st or 20th centuries BC and would have been familiar with the Code of Ur-Nammu.)
- Laws of Eshnunna – 20th century BC
- Code of Lipit-Istar – 19th century BC
- Code of Hammurabi – 18th century BC
- Hittite Laws – 17th century BC
- Law of Moses – 15th century BC

Though the beginning date of legal codes in Egypt has not been established, it appears that criminal and civil cases were being judged as early as the 22nd century BC.

We do not see in the Bible where God gave any other legal commandments to all people following what we read in Genesis 9. We see in Genesis 11 that God confused the language of rebellious humans and scattered the families across the world. However, we don't read that God gave them any new commandments at that time.

Ancient Legal Codes

The oldest legal code we have archaeological evidence for is the Code of Urukagina. **Urukagina** was an ancient ruler of a city-state in the northeastern part of Mesopotamia (ancient Girsu and Lagash). The Bible tells us that Nimrod, son of Cush and great-grandson of Noah, built many of the cities in ancient Mesopotamia. Those included Babel, Erech, Accad, Calneh, Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen. Though the Bible does not give us any list of Nimrod's descendants, they may have been early rulers of his city-states. It was the ruler's job to govern the people and ensure the continued worship of their gods (e.g. Enlil, Ninlil, Ninurta/Ningirsu, Shulshagana, Bau, Anzu).

A fragment of the Code of Urukagina can be seen in the **Louvre Museum** in Paris. We also have two of his 'liberty cones' and learn about some of his social reforms. We can also see the two Liberty Cones at the Louvre.

They include information about social, economic and religious conditions at the time and **Urukagina's reforms**. He addressed many abuses of the citizens by previous rulers, temple administrators and priests. The government was corrupt and abuses included unfair taxes and the theft of personal property by leaders.

We learn from the Code of Urukagina and the Liberty Cones that the governor established legal, economic, social and religious reforms that treated people more fairly (including widows and orphans) – evidence of a desire by some in ancient leadership to value people more highly – just as God commanded Noah. He removed many of the corrupt people in government and established fairness throughout the social, economic and legal system.

The city-state of Ur was in the southeastern part of Mesopotamia. Ur-Nammu claimed to be a mighty warrior and king of Ur, Sumer and Akkad, “by the might of Nanna, lord of the city, and in accordance with the true word of Ut.”

The **Code of Ur-Nammu** can be seen at the Istanbul Archaeological Museums/Ancient Orient Museum in Turkey. The code lists a crime followed by the punishment for that crime, which is a format used for thousands of years up to the present time.

The first crime to be addressed (following the Prologue) was murder. Notice how closely the code followed God's command to Noah and his sons. First, from the Code of Ur-Nammu –

"If a man commits a murder, that man must be killed."

Next, from God's commandment to Noah and his sons –

"Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed."

Very close in wording and intent.

The second law in the Code of Ur-Nammu reads –

“If a man commits a robbery, he will be killed.”

That went further than God’s command to Noah, but demonstrates how rulers viewed the value of people and their property.

Other laws in the Code of Ur-Nammu addressed issues of kidnapping, rape, slavery, adultery, divorce, sorcery, assault that caused physical injury, and perjury. Property crimes are also mentioned along with specific penalties for breaking the Code.

Keep in mind that the Code of Ur-Nammu is the legal system Abram would have grown up with in Ur. That Code, along with the commands God gave to him directly, would be a primary driver in how Abram viewed people and property.

Once Abram moved from Ur to Haran and then to Canaan, he began interacting with different groups of people who had varying ideas about how to treat people and property. We see Abram dealing with the Canaanites and Egyptians. Both of those nations and their legal and social policies played a major role in the life of the nation of Israel, so it's important to note that in our response to your question. (I'm including other peoples in the area of Canaan under the umbrella name of Canaanites. Those include the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites).

Abraham's (Abram) first son (Ishmael) came from his union with an Egyptian servant girl (Hagar) who came with him and his wife (Sarah) from their time in Egypt. Ishmael had several sons and became the father of the Ishmaelites. Abraham's second son (Isaac) came from his union with his wife, Sarah. Isaac became the father of Esau and Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel. Jacob had twelve sons.

One of them, Joseph, had to deal directly with the legal code of Egypt. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers to a group of Ishmaelites who sold him to an officer of the Egyptian king (pharaoh). Joseph got along well until an officer's wife falsely accused Joseph of trying to have sex with her. The officer had Joseph thrown into prison, which tells us something about the Egyptian laws of the time.

We learn a bit more about Egyptian laws because of two of the people Joseph met in prison. The king become angry with his chief butler and chief baker and threw them into prison. We don't know why the pharaoh was angry with them, but it demonstrated his legal authority and power.

We also learn more about Egyptian law after Joseph was released from prison and made second in command to the pharaoh. Joseph became an Egyptian ruler and established many of the laws that guided Egypt through a great famine. Joseph moved his father and brothers from Canaan to Egypt to protect them during the famine.

That's important background to understand when we come to Moses, because the questions you asked concern what is known as the Law of Moses (Mosaic Law). Moses was a Hebrew born in Egypt because Jacob (Israel) and his family had moved from Canaan to Egypt. If God had not intervened in the life of their family, Moses would have been born in Canaan (if Jacob's family could have survived the famine). It was God's plan that Moses be born in Egypt during a time when a new pharaoh who did not know Joseph became ruler. The new pharaoh changed the laws that had blessed the people of Israel under Joseph to a time of brutal slavery.

Keep in mind that the king of Egypt at the time Moses was born had commanded that every son born to the Hebrew people was to be cast into the river to die. The daughters born to the Hebrews were allowed to live. God saved Moses from being killed after he was born and made it so Moses would become the adopted son of one of the king's daughters. We learn in Acts 7 that Moses was schooled in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. That would have included their laws.

Moses had to run for his life when the pharaoh heard that Moses had killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. Moses was 40-years-old when he left Egypt and traveled to the land of Midian. He worked as a shepherd for 40 more years, married and had a son. God called Moses from the burning bush when he was 80-years-old and told him to go back to Egypt to confront a new pharaoh about freeing the people Israel. A short time after God miraculously brought the people of Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness, Moses received God's Law.

The Mosaic Legal Code

Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness and wrote extensively about what God revealed to him. Moses wrote about the history of the world and the Hebrew people (Genesis). He wrote about God's deliverance of His people from Egypt and giving them a new legal code – the Law of Moses.

Keep in mind as we look specifically at some of the laws in the Mosaic Code that God first established a basic legal code with Noah.

“Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.”

That basic code was built on by some rulers for centuries following Noah. They expanded on it but kept the basic idea of the value and worth of human beings. Even though many ancient rulers and leaders abused their positions and their people, reformers would return to the basic concepts God gave Noah.

What God did with Moses and Israel was to expand on His previous commandment to Noah in a way only God could do. The other legal systems of the time were human ideas about how to build on God's original commands. While some of their ideas, especially of the social, economic and legal reformers of the time, had some good points, the evil intent of people's hearts would lead them to abuse and mistreat and neglect those who were weaker or not of the ruling class.

God revealed a system of laws that addressed crime and punishment in a way that reflected both His holiness and righteousness, and His mercy and grace.

You mentioned two portions of the Mosaic Law in your question, so let's look at each one.

“She shall put off the clothes of her captivity, remain in your house, and mourn her father and her mother a full month; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. And it shall be, if you have no delight in her, then you ‘hall set her free, but you certainly shall not sell her for money; you shall not treat her brutally, because you have humbled her ... If a man finds a young woman who is a virgin, who is not betrothed, and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are found out, then the man who lay with her shall give to the young woman’s father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife because he has humbled her; he shall not be permitted to divorce her all his days.’

DEUTERONOMY 21:13-14 AND 22:28-29

Your question from those verses is: ‘There seems to be no admonishment to take into consideration a captive woman’s wishes when deciding to marry her; also, this seems to be an instance when divorce without reason is perfectly legal. Is this correct?’

The context for this section of the Law begins in Deuteronomy 20 where God told Israel how to treat captives of war. Chapter 21 addresses a Hebrew soldier who saw a captive woman he would like to take for his wife.

Women were treated very badly in the ancient world and still are in many parts of the world today. They had little if any legal rights. It was even worse for a woman who was taken captive during war. They were often severely beaten and sexually abused.

What God did through His Law was elevate the importance of women. That included both Hebrew women and non-Hebrew women taken captive during war.

The Mosaic Law forbid a Hebrew soldier from taking a female captive as his wife immediately. He had to allow the woman to live in his house as a mourner for at least a month. Shaving of a woman's head and putting off the clothes female captives wore before (or sometimes after) they were captured would have been part of that mourning process. She was allowed that time to mourn for her parents and her country. She would have also learned about Israel's God and the importance of not worshipping the gods of her country. It would also have given the Hebrew soldier time to consider whether he really wanted to marry her. After her time of mourning, the Hebrew soldier was allowed to marry her.

That marriage elevated the woman from being a captive of war to being a member of the people of God. She was a Hebrew wife. That brought with it many privileges and responsibilities.

The next part of the Law concerned the Hebrew soldier no longer 'delighting' in his wife.

Remember what Jesus said in response to a question about divorce –

They said to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ He said to them, ‘Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. MATTHEW 19:7-8

God allowed divorce, but it was not His original plan for married people.

In the case of the Hebrew soldier who married a captive of war and wanted to divorce her, he had to set her free. He could not sell her for money. He was also not allowed to treat her brutally. The captive bride was a full member of the people of God through marriage and was not to be mistreated. She had legal rights.

Think about that for a moment. A woman could go from being a captive of war to being a Hebrew wife and even set legally free if her Hebrew husband divorced her. God valued women thousands of years ago and continued to value women today.

Your next question comes from Numbers 15:32-35 –

Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.

Your question – ‘As for adultery and rape, I could not tell which the later passage was referring to. It being the Bible I would like to assume it means adultery (mutual consent) but without knowing any Hebrew I cannot tell for sure. Regardless it seems to be saying that adultery with an unengaged woman has no severe punishment, whereas gathering sticks on the Sabbath day is punishable by death (Numbers 15:32-35). Is this correct? If so, how is it Just?’

If you mean the verses in Deuteronomy 21, it addressed the issue of a Hebrew soldier wanting to marry a Gentile captive of war. We find the issues of adultery and rape addressed in other portions of the Law (e.g. Exodus 20, Leviticus 20, Deuteronomy 5). Moses addressed issues of sexual morality in Deuteronomy 22, which follows closely to passage we looked at in Deuteronomy 21.

Now, to the question about gathering sticks on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is one of the prime Laws of God. It, along with the Law concerning not making a ‘carved image,’ include the most explanation in the Ten Commandments –

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. EXODUS 20:8-11

The Sabbath rest played a significant role in the life of Israel and God’s dealing with His people. God gave the Israelites six days to ‘labor and do all your work.’ The Sabbath was a day of rest and no one was to work on that day. It was set apart for worship and rest from labor.

The penalty for not keeping the Sabbath Day was significant. God spoke to Moses about it again just before He finished giving the Law to him –

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.’ And when He had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave

Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. EXODUS 31:12-18

God viewed any breaking of the Sabbath as ‘profaning’ the Law. That’s because disobedience attacked God’s ‘sanctifying’ (setting apart) of His people. The word ‘profane’ is *chalal* and means ‘to pierce, to bore’ and demonstrated the disobedient person’s disregard for what was important to God.

Anyone who ‘profaned’ the Sabbath would be killed and cut off from the people of Israel. That’s a serious penalty for a serious offense. The Sabbath was a ‘sign’ (*oth* – pledge) between God and His people ‘throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you.’

As innocuous as gathering sticks might seem to us, that person had six other days of the week to do that work. Doing something like gathering sticks demonstrated their disregard for God and the importance of the ‘sign’ God had made between Himself and His people. Someone who would do something as unimportant as gathering sticks when they had

six other days to do that was a sure sign that they were not interested in what God had said or was doing with His people.

As we bring this answer to a close, it's important to remember that kings determined crimes and punishment for those crimes in ancient times. Interestingly, the ancient legal codes seem to have expanded on the commandment God gave to Noah and his sons.

The Mosaic Law is God's expansion on the intent of His commandment to Noah. Which laws are better? God's or humans? As we compare legal, social, economic and religious situations of antiquity, it appears God's Laws demonstrated the intent of His words to Noah concerning the value of human life.

Ancient kings determined what was just and fair in their kingdoms. God does the same in His Kingdom. When comparing the issue of justice, I believe we can find good reason to see how the Mosaic Law was a just and fair code for the time.

I like how the Apostle Paul shared the importance of the Mosaic Law with the Galatians who were Gentiles.

What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one. Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. GALATIANS 3:19-25

The Law is a tutor (school master) “to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” What a blessing to live at this time with the understanding we have about Law and Grace –

For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. John 1:17

Thank you for your questions! We hope these answers help.

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