Exodus 19—40 Resources

# The "Law Code" of Hammurabi

Hammurabi was king of Babylon about 1792‑1750 (on any theory this is several centuries before Moses). His laws are a miscellaneous collection of judgments rather than a systematic code. They seem to have been originally published near the beginning of his reign, but later updated. They are apparently more a statement of theory than a code for implementation: we know something of Babylonian legal practice, and it does not follow this "code" (as is the case with the Old Testament laws). This cross‑section is based on the version in R. W. Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament.* See also J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts; D. W.* Thomas (ed.), *Documents from Old Testament Times.*

Harper’s Bible Dictionary says of the code: It is not legally binding and it does not reflect actual legal practice as evidenced by contracts etc. It’s “a literary and intellectual construct that gives expression to legal thinking and moral values.”

The collection begins with a picture of Sun, the god of justice, presenting the laws to Hammurabi. The text itself opens with Hammurabi's account of being called to be king by the gods.

When Marduk sent me to rule men and to promulgate justice, I put justice and righteousness into the language of the land, and promoted the welfare of the people. At that time [I ordered]

1 If a citizen has accused a citizen and charged him with murder and has not justified it, his accuser shall be put to death.

2 If a citizen has charged a citizen with sorcery and has not justified it, the one against whom the charge of sorcery is laid shall go to River and plunge into River, and if River overcomes

him, his accuser shall take over his estate. If River has declared the citizen innocent and has saved him, his accuser shall be put to death. The one who plunged into River shall take over his accuser's estate.

4 If [a citizen] has lied as a witness concerning corn or money, he shall himself bear the sentence of that case.

8 If a citizen has stolen ox or sheep or ass or pig or boat, if it belonged to a god or a palace, he shall restore thirtyfold. If it belonged to a private citizen, he shall restore tenfold. If the thief does not have wherewith to pay he shall be put to death.

14 If a citizen has stolen the child of another citizen he shall be put to death.

15 If a citizen helps a male or female slave ... to escape through the city gate, he shall be put to death.

26 If either a soldier or an officer who is ordered to go on an errand of the king does not go but hires a replacement and sends him in his place, that soldier or officer shall be put to death; his replacement shall take over his estate.

42 If a citizen has rented a field for cultivation and has not produced grain on the field, they shall examine whether he has worked on the field and he shall give the owner of the field

grain on the basis of the neighboring fields.

48 If a citizen has a debt and Ramman (the weather god] ravage his field and carry away the produce, or if grain has not grown through shortage of water, in that year he shall not make any

return of grain to the creditor; he shall re‑write his contract‑tablet. He shall also not pay any interest for that year.

55 If a citizen has opened his canal for irrigation and neglected it, and the water has carried away an adjacent field, he shall measure out grain on the basis of the adjacent fields.

64 If a citizen has given his garden to a gardener to manage, the gardener shall give to the owner of the garden two‑thirds of the produce....

109 If outlaws have gathered in the house of a wine merchant and she does not arrest these outlaws and take them to the palace, that wine merchant shall be put to death.

110 If a nun who is not living in a convent has opened a wine shop or has entered a wine shop for a drink, that woman shall be burnt.

113 If a citizen has a debt of grain or money against a citizen and he takes grain without the owner's consent from the heap or from the store, that citizen is to be called to account ... and

he shall restore as much grain as he took and shall forfeit all that he has lent.

117 If a citizen is in debt and sells his wife, his son, or his daughter for the money, or has handed them over to service, for three years they shall work in the house of their purchaser or

the one to whom he has the obligation; in the fourth year they shall be set at liberty.

129 If the wife of a citizen be caught lying with another citizen, they shall be bound and thrown into the water. If the woman's husband wishes to spare his wife, the king may also

spare his subject.

130 If a citizen rapes another citizen's [betrothed] wife who had not known a man ... that man shall be put to death and that woman shall go free.

134 If a citizen has been taken prisoner and there is no food in his house, and his wife enter into another house, that woman incurs no blame.

137 If a citizen has set his face to put away a concubine who has borne him children or a wife who has presented him with children, he shall return her dowry to that woman and also give

her half of the field, orchard, and goods in order that she may bring up her children.

141 If the wife of a citizen who is living in his house has set her face to leave in order that she may engage in business, has neglected her house, [and] has humiliated her husband ... he shall not give her anything for divorce.

145 If a citizen has taken a priestess as wife and she has not presented him with children and he set his face to take a concubine, that citizen may take a concubine and bring her into

his house. That concubine shall not rank with his wife.

153 If a citizen's wife cause her husband to be killed for the sake of another man, they shall impale that woman.

154 If a citizen has known his daughter, they shall expel that citizen from the city.

157 If a citizen lie in the bosom of his mother after [the death of] his father, both shall be burned.

168 If a citizen has set his face to cut off his son ... the judges shall inquire into his record, and if the son has not committed a heavy crime ... the father shall not cut off his son.

180 If a father has not granted a marriage settlement to his daughter ... after the father has gone to his fate, she shall receive as her share of the goods of her father's house the

portion of a son....

188 If an artisan has taken a son for adoption and has taught him his craft, he may not be reclaimed.

195 If a man has struck his father, they shall cut off his hand

196 If a citizen has destroyed another citizen's eye, his eye is to be destroyed.

198 If he has destroyed a commoner's eye ... he shall pay sixty shekels of silver.

199 If he has destroyed the eye of a citizen's slave ... he shall pay one half his market‑value.

202 If a citizen has struck cheek of his superior, he shall receive sixty strokes with an oxtail in public.

209 If a citizen has struck a citizen's daughter and causes her to lose her child, he shall pay ten shekels of silver for what was in her womb.

210 If that woman has died, his daughter is to be put to death.

221 If a doctor has set a broken bone for a citizen or cured a painful swelling, the patient shall pay five shekels of silver.

222 If he is the son of a commoner, he shall pay three shekels.

223 If he is a citizen's slave, the slave's owner shall pay two shekels.

224 If a veterinary surgeon operates on an ox or ass for a severe wound and saves its life, the owner ... shall give one sixth of a shekel of silver to the surgeon as his fee.

225 If he operates on an ox or an ass for a severe wound and cause its death, he shall give to the owner... one fourth of its value.

226 If a brander, without the consent of the owner of a slave, have made a slave's mark unrecognizable, they shall cut off the hands of that brander.

228 If a builder has built a house for a citizen ... that citizen shall give him as his fee one shekel of silver per twenty square yards of house.

229 If a builder has built a house for a citizen and has not made it strong, and the house built has fallen and caused the death of its owner, the builder shall be put to death.

230 If he has caused the death of the son of the house's owner, the builder's son shall be put to death.

231 If he has caused the death of a slave of the house's owner, he shall give the house's owner slave for slave.

232 If he has caused the loss of property, he shall restore whatever he has caused to be lost. Further, because he did not make strong the house he built and it fell, he shall rebuild the

house that fell at his own expense.

242 If a citizen has hired a working ox for one year, he shall pay 200 gallons of grain for the hire.

244 If a citizen has hired an ox or an ass and a lion kills it in the field, it is the owner's loss.

245 If a citizen has hired an ox and through neglect or blows has caused its death, ox for ox he shall render to the owner.

251 If an ox given to goring belongs to a citizen and ... he has not bound up his horns or shut up his ox, and that ox has gored a citizen and killed him, he shall pay thirty shekels of silver.

260 If a citizen has stolen a water bucket or a harrow, he shall pay three shekels of silver.

282 If a slave has said to his master "You are not my master", he is to be called to account ... and his master shall cut off his ear.

[In a long epilogue Hammurabi describes his achievements in establishing justice and prays at length for the gods to bring trouble on anyone who does not keep his law.]

# Exodus 21: Servitude and Slavery—Divine Condescension in the Torah and the New Testament

Margaret Davies discusses “Slavery in the Old Testament and the New” (in *The Bible in Ethics* [ed. J. W. Rogerson and others; Sheffield Academic Press, 1995]). She notes that the Old Testament has two approaches to social ethics. On one hand, it legislates for the social order, attempting to place limits on the oppression of the weak by the powerful. On the other, it lays out moral obligations before people, attempting to get them to be generous and considerate to the needy. In contrast, the New Testament writings “provide nothing like the breadth of vision in social affairs to be found in the Jewish scriptures” (p. 321). They encourage charity but they have no vision for empowering the needy to support themselves or for encouraging justice in society.

Further, the slavery of New Testament times is a much more oppressive institution than the short-term indentured labor caused by debt that is accepted by the Torah. The Old Testament is talking about something more like being a servant than being a slave. New Testament slavery involves people becoming the property of other people and being subject to their absolute power. It is New Testament-like slavery that Britain encouraged and America accepted.

1 Corinthians 7 expects that slaves should be treated as full members of the Christian community but contains no exhortation for their having a new position in society or being freed. In Philemon, Onesimus is to continue as a slave even though also to be regarded as a brother. “The letter endorses the social institution of slavery and accepts the slave-owner’s absolute power over his slave. There is nothing in the New Testament to compare with Philo’s description of Essene belief and practice: ‘They denounce the owners of slaves, not merely for outraging the law of equality, but also for their impiety in annulling the statute of nature, who like a mother has borne and reared all alike as genuine brothers,’”

[Philo was a Jewish philosopher in New Testament times. The Essenes were a Jewish group alongside Pharisees and the Sadducees; the Qumran community was Essene or Essene-like.]

In Colossians 3:22 – 4:1 slaves are told to obey their masters in everything. Slave-owners are told to be fair to their slaves (cf. Ephesians 6:5-9), but evidently they are not expected to free them in accordance with Scriptures such as Deuteronomy 15. In 1 Timothy 6 there is an exhortation to slaves to honor masters, but no exhortation to slave-owners (cf. Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-25).

“A comparison with Deuteronomy and Leviticus shows that the New Testament represents an impoverishment of traditions, an impoverishment which allowed gross injustice to flourish in Christian countries through the centuries.”

There are other areas of life where we can see that the New Testament has lower standards than the Old. There is no expectation in the Old Testament that wives should be silent when people gather for worship. Only the New Testament says that wives should obey their husbands. So in regard to relations between the sexes, the New Testament also represents “an impoverishment of traditions.” This is not to say that it is not authoritative Scripture; evidently God had reason for allowing such exhortations to have a place in the New Testament. They illustrate the way the New Testament, like the Old, makes allowance for the hardness of human hearts (Mark 10:5). What it does mean is that we should not assume that the teaching of the Old is outdated by that of the New. Both Testaments are resources for the community’s understanding of God’s expectations.

African-American Professor of Law Stephen Carter puts it this way in his book *Integrity* (New York: Basic Books, 1996). In the Civil War Abraham Lincoln compromised on the issue of slavery in order to save the Union, but as a result he was in due course able both to keep the Union and to bring about the abolition of slavery. If he had not compromised over slavery to keep the Union intact, he might never have been able to bring about abolition in due course.

It is thus not surprising that Baptist missionaries in Jamaica in the early nineteenth century opposed the abolition of slavery on the basis of texts from Paul; the key person among them supporting abolition did so on the basis of Old Testament texts.

# Exodus 32—34: How Shall We Think of God’s Presence with Us?

It can seem as if it is clear enough what we mean by the idea of God’s presence, though when we think about it, the question becomes more complex. We know that God is present in the entire world. Yet the Torah also has God saying to people such as Jacob or Moses, “I will be with you” (Genesis 28:15; Exodus 3:12), which implies a different kind of presence. The Torah speaks of God appearing to Jacob and of his response, “Yahweh is in this place, and I myself did not realize” (Genesis 28:16), which implies another kind of presence. It also raises the question of the relationship between God’s presence as something objective and God’s presence as something we sense (in Western thinking, “God’s presence often means “a sense of God’s presence”). Paul speaks of being present in spirit though not in body (1 Corinthians 5:3-4) and I know that sometimes my students are present in body but not in spirit. I can be in someone’s presence physically but not paying attention to them; I might as well not be there.

The account of God’s meeting with Israel in Exodus 19 – 24 begins with a recognition that the presence of God is dangerous; we have noted that Hebrews 12:18-28 confirms this for Christians, reminding us, too, that our God is a consuming fire. Exodus’s point is not that our sin makes God’s presence dangerous but that God’s power makes God’s presence dangerous in the way that electricity or fire or radiation is dangerous. The people’s reaction to God’s presence (Exodus 20:18-21) matches that fact; awareness of God’s presence makes people shrink away, as Peter did from Jesus when he made it possible for them to catch an extraordinary number of fish (Luke 5:8). Yet Israel’s leaders then climb Sinai and see God (or at least see the platform on which God sits), without God electrocuting them. Indeed they eat and drink in God’s presence, taking part in the meal involved in a fellowship sacrifice (Exodus 24). The reference to seeing God contrasts with assertions that one cannot see God (Exodus 33:20-23). Like the idea of God’s presence, the idea of seeing God is a complicated one. It is possible to have a real experience of being in God’s presence, something like sight, but seeing God is not merely impossible because God is invisible but inadvisable because the sight would be too blindingly bright.

The theme of God’s presence is explored more systematically in Exodus 32 – 34. Perhaps forgivably, the people have no sense of God’s presence; the person who forms the link between them and God’s presence is up on top of the mountain and doesn’t seem to be coming back. They want something that embodies God’s presence and they get Aaron to make a calf out of gold, which is the kind of thing that people in their culture possess to embody the divine presence, but the kind of thing Yahweh has already prohibited. Deuteronomy 4 will later explain that it cannot do so; it can only misrepresent God’s nature. As a result of this action, there is an extra reason for the presence of God to be a danger to Israel. By declining to comply with God’s expectations in this particular respect, Israel has turned God’s presence into something dangerous not only for metaphysical reasons but for moral reasons. This turn of events leads to the replacement of God’s presence by the presence of the human leader and of a divine aide, which in a sense mediate God’s presence but also protect the “stiff-necked” people (Exodus 32:34 – 33:6). Yet the story immediately goes on to describe a meeting tent where God is accessible to the people; “anyone who had recourse to Yahweh [for help or advice] would go out to the meeting tent” (Exodus 33:7). The tent was “outside the camp”; but people could be in God’s presence there.

Moses, too, meets with God there, but he also wants to know whom Yahweh will send with him and the people on their journey. This may seem odd after God’s words in Exodus 32:34 – 33:6, but this oddity reflects precisely the way these chapters are at one level a discussion of a theological question not merely a linear account of some events (the oddity also reflects the way the Torah brings together a number of stories that may overlap in their timeframe or sequence). Moses’ question leads to Yahweh’s making another statement about God’s presence: “My face will go” with Moses and Israel (Exodus 33:17). There is in fact no separate Hebrew word for “presence”; virtually always, the word “presence” in English translations represents the Hebrew word for “face.” We can thus see why there is a link between the idea of seeing God and the idea of God’s presence. It is through seeing someone’s face that we are aware of their presence. So there is a sense in which God will avoid being present with the people because that would be too dangerous, but also a sense in which God will be with them ensuring that they reach their destination.

Moses then asks to see God’s splendor. A person’s splendor is the brightness or glow or intensity of their presence or their face. Yahweh’s response is to say Moses indeed can see God’s entire goodness and can hear God proclaim the name “Yahweh,” which embodies God’s grace and compassion, but he cannot see God’s actual face, because a human being cannot see God and stay alive. Of course Moses and other Israelites have already done so; but the point then is not that the Torah is contradicting itself over this question but that it is reflecting the complexity involved in speaking of these realities. To safeguard the point about God’s dazzling splendor, while Moses cannot see God’s face, he can see God’s back after God has passed by (we might compare the stories about Jesus’ resurrection, which never describe the event; you do not see God coming or acting, only disappearing afterwards). The very idea of God’s having a face presupposes that God can appear in quasi-human form (after all, humanity was made in God’s image, so this should not be so difficult), and when God appears God can therefore have a back, which it will be safe for Moses to see. Once again, the image suggests that Moses will know he has been in God’s presence, but will be protected from the overwhelming nature of that experience.

In connection with Yahweh’s renewing the covenant with Israel after Israel has broken it and Yahweh has annulled it by breaking the stone tablets, Moses asks again, “May the Lord go in our midst” (Exodus 34:9). It is a rare example of the Old Testament’s using the actual word “Lord”; Moses is acknowledging Yahweh’s sovereignty even while pleading for God to be gracious. Yahweh’s response is to promise to work wonders for Israel. The Old Testament does link the idea of God’s face or presence with the idea of God acting, so perhaps that is the implication of Moses’ prayer, which means he is making a different point from the talk of God’s presence earlier. In Exodus 32 – 34, the last comment on God’s presence comes in the description of the effect on Moses’ face of standing before God’s face. Moses would go into Yahweh’s presence (literally, “to Yahweh’s face”), and it would be as if Moses grew horns; maybe the reference is to a radiance like the rays of the sun. Moses’ own face came to shine unbearably, reflecting God’s shining, and to inspire fear, so that Moses veiled his face.

The theme of God’s presence is taken up again in the account of the wilderness sanctuary for Yahweh, which Israel constructs. God’s commission (Exodus 25:8) has already spoken in terms of wanting a place to dwell among all the people, and notwithstanding the making of the calf, Moses assumes that God’s desire still holds (Exodus 35:1, 4). When the work is done, the cloud comes to settle (literally, to “dwell”) on the meeting tent (which means Moses cannot enter it), and God’s splendor fills the dwelling itself. From now on Israel can see the cloud, and by night the fire inside it, which tells them whether God wants to be on the move.

It is inappropriate to seek to formulate a systematic summary of the discussion of God’s presence in Exodus. We can say that Exodus distinguishes (for instance) God’s presence as a reality, God’s presence as known in action, God’s presence as a feeling, and God’s presence as a focus. We can say that it recognizes the sense in which we can have a true experience of God’s presence and the sense in which we cannot. But the reason for discussing these questions in a narrative is to make it possible to walk around the questions this issue raises without deluding ourselves into thinking that they are the kind of questions that get answers. They are questions such as, in what sense is God on Mount Sinai? In what sense can the people meet with God there? In what sense is meeting with God an idea to be enthusiastic about, in what sense an idea to fear? In what sense can you be sure about meeting God;, and in what sense does it depend on whether God wants to be met? What ideas about God’s presence are suggested by the meeting tent and the wilderness dwelling? What difference does sin make to an experience of God’s presence? Questions such as these are questions one lives with rather than finally answers, and Exodus helps us do so.

# (d) Responses to Questions I Have Been Asked About Exodus 19—40

There is more info in my *Exodus and Leviticus for Everyone* (Louisville: WJK/London: SPCK, 2010).

## “Laws”

*How bad were things in the wilderness that they needed all these laws?*

*\*\**That’s a great question! And most of the laws would be irrelevant to life in the wilderness! See the section on “How the Torah Works” and the comments that follow.

*Why are the laws mostly negative rather than inspirational?*

*\*\**Isn’t that the nature of laws? They are designed to limit the negative consequences of human waywardness. The inspirational element in the Torah is the stories (not least the story of the exodus itself.

*Why all the elaborateness and specifics in regards to the tabernacle, ark, etc.? Is it to give the Israelites a symbol of God’s presence?*

*\*\**Yes. And to give them specifics to obey.

*Might it have been better to starve than to sell your daughter? Why doesn’t God command masters to set slaves free as opposed to giving guidelines on how to manage slaves?*

*\*\**Because this would not be to the advantage of slaves—or rather, servants; slavery is a misleading expression for us. What Exodus is talking about is a commitment on your part and/or on the part of family members to working for someone for up to years in return for a loan now, when the harvest has failed and you are hopelessly in debt. If you cannot do that, you are sunk. The rules limit such servitude to six years and so that people can’t be put into lifelong slavery. It can lead to marriage for a girl, but it need not do so.

I am confused about the ease with which death is the punishment for crimes like cursing a parent or owning a violent ox. The sixth commandment says not to murder—do these crimes warrant the death of the offender?

\*\*Execution doesn't count as murder, in Hebrew as in English. The rule about the ox presupposes that its owner is guilty of a kind of third degree murder. But anyway, in the OT people never seem to be executed for wrongs for which the Torah prescribes the death penalty (e.g., adultery, incest, idolatry ). Things are similar in other Middle Eastern peoples. So it looks as if prescribing the death penalty is a way of saying "this is a really terrible offence" rather than a "law."

*Does the absence of recorded execution of murderers or adulterers in the OT really suggest the laws are “soft rules”? If so, how do we see that Israel later on went to exile which seems to be the cumulative effect of their transgressions.*

\*\*The regulation about execution may be a soft rule, but the command about murder or adultery or idolatry isn’t a soft rule, and it’s for such offenses that the exile happens.

Why is there so much emphasis on not boiling a kid goat in its mother’s milk?

\*\*The best guess is that it makes the means of life into the means of death.

Why are women treated as property?

*\*\**I don’t think they are…

Are care for widows and orphans unique to the OT?

\*\*No, they are common to many societies. It’s again part of the way God created humanity. What the OT sometimes does is give people a new reason for obedience—the way God rescued them from Egypt sets them an example.

## Exodus and Hammurabi

*What are the key similarities with Hammurabi?*

\*\*Both have a general moral compass; both assume an eye for an eye.

*And what are the key differences?*

\*\*Hammurabi is all about land and property rights; it treats different classes in different ways; it gives debtors only three years to sort themselves out; it stresses cursing (because it is assumed to be dangerous); it makes less reference to God.

*Just like the Exodus laws, in Hammurabi the principle of an eye for an eye is displayed. Was this a common idea at the time? Did the Israelites adopt this idea because it was culturally relevant during this time period or a directive from God? How do we reconcile “an eye for an eye” with “turn the other cheek”?*

\*\*One point about it is to make the punishment fit the crime rather than being excessive – it limits punishment (see Gen 4:23-24). And it requires actual punishment rather than allowing for rich people to pay a fine to buy off the consequences of their acts. But note also the poetic nature of the language, as when Jesus speaks of cutting your hand off. It’s a poetic way of saying that penalties must be equivalent. So “an eye for an eye” belongs more in the context of the community governing its life and resolving conflicts, whereas “turn the other cheek” belongs in the context of personal relationships. The Israelites didn’t infer that there was a tension between “an eye for an eye” and “love your neighbor” (your neighbor being your enemy, in the context) and neither does the NT. Joseph turned the other cheek, and other Jews in Jesus’ day were committed to peacemaking but didn’t infer that Israel should never have gone to war. Jesus says nothing about not taking part in war (unlike the Essenes). He has only commendation for a centurion in Matthew 8. His declaration about non-forgiveness in Matthew 6 works with the principle of an eye for an eye (you don’t forgive—you don’t get forgiven) and he sends people to hell.

*Could they have taken these laws from codes like Hammurabi’s? How is the Holy Spirit involved in the inspiration of these laws? Are they part of conventional wisdom/general revelation that was adopted by Israel? Do they speak against Hammurabi or build on it?*  
 \*\*They could have done—or from a more general awareness of the conventions in Middle Eastern society. Either way, one theological assumption is that by virtue of being created by God, other peoples have some knowledge of the basics of right and wrong. But the Holy Spirit is also involved in helping them to see how such conventions need adapting in the context of Israelite faith.

## Prayer

*What about the view that prayer is a way of getting in on what God is doing and not something that changes God’s mind.*

\*\*That’s not the idea in Exodus, is it? One of the most frightening verses in scripture is “You have not because you ask not” (James 4:2). That implies prayer makes a difference. Scripture is quite clear that prayer is about changing God’s mind, not conforming our will to God’s.

*On what criteria does God answer intercessory prayer? Why does it sometimes work and sometimes seem not to work? Why are the results of our prayers so mysteriously unpredictable? Is it the manner of the prayer, the persistence, the essence of the argument, the life and actions of the pray-er? While no doubt God answers prayers that are in line with God’s will and God’s greater plan, sometimes it seems more arbitrary than that. When we intercede for people, particularly the needy, the hurting, the oppressed, why does it seem like God does not answer? We are praying according to His Kingdom’s ways and goals, yet the suffering not only does not disappear, but it often escalates.*

\*\*Scripture doesn’t definitively answer many of those questions. To judge from Job 38-41 that’s partly because God chooses not to let us know everything about how he works. Maybe it’s partly because prayer is part of a personal relationship with God; personal relationships don’t work on the basis of rules. When prayers for healing or the relief of injustice don’t get answered, it’s partly because there is a continuing effect of death and sin in the world which will not be finally terminated until the End—in this age, God’s interventions are selective. The scriptural image of the cabinet helps me. People such as Jeremiah describe themselves as being admitted to God’s cabinet, where decisions get taken. So that is what happens when we pray. But you can never predict what decisions will emerge from a cabinet’s discussion of an issue. The chair or president will listen to the cabinet and make a decision on the basis of the arguments. Sometimes we win the argument and get an intervention, sometimes we lose the argument and don’t. We probably won’t know why in particular, though we can know in general. Because Christ is risen from the dead, it is natural that some people get healed. But because it is not yet the End, it is natural that most don’t get healed. Maybe it’s random who does and who does not.

*Who can have access to this cabinet meeting? Through Christ do we all have an equal say? Or do some of us have a greater voice in the meetings with God? In the same way that in business meetings, some voices are heard more so than others, is this how it is with God? Does the new Christian sit in the back of the discussion meeting and the “veterans of the faith” sit up front?*\*\*The church is admitted to the cabinet meetings – when we as the church pray, we are exercising that freedom. I don’t see any indication in scripture that some people have more weight than others – or rather, it’s the arguments that decide the day.

*The puzzling part is the changing of God’s mind. Is this in fact a test of human beings to implore upon God for the sake of others or did Moses in fact, change God’s mind? This would imply that a human being in this instance is more just than God – that in human understanding, we could more justly punish.*

\*\*The scriptures often tell us that God has a change of mind in response to human beings, not least to our prayers. (In Numbers it also says that God does not have changes of mind, which I take to safeguard the fact that God is not arbitrary or unreliable—but we can hardly let these passages make us reckon that all those others are metaphorical. I comment on that passage in connection with Numbers.) God has to keep deciding in a given context whether to punish or whether to be merciful. It’s a judgment call which way to go. Both are appropriate for different reasons. So there is always a possibility that God can be tipped from punishment to mercy. If you want to safeguard God’s justice by including the idea that God is giving Moses opportunity to implore God to do what God anyway wants to do, then you can do so, but I don’t think Scripture feels that need.

*It’s very humble of God to share with us the making of decisions in the world, by listening to our intercession. But humbling oneself connotes submission. It allows for something to be greater than itself. If God humbles himself, is he still all-powerful? And if God is supremely wise would his consultation of mortals, who are incredibly unwise truly be an act of humility?*

\*\*Maybe it helps to recall the image of God as like a parent. Parents probably know better than their children, but they want their children to be involved in making decisions, because that’s involved in full humanity. The scriptures seem to reckon that there is nothing more powerful than self-humbling, than submission to someone else. That is what the cross eventually shows most vividly!

*It seems that when the scripture says God says we take God out of it and look at the human factors that have contributed to writing the text the way it is, with differences and contradictions seemingly written off as God adapting to humanity. It seems implausible that God would change His mind about His initial commandments to make them fit easier into the sinfulness of his people. With this mindset we could go as far as to say that I don’t really have to obey God’s commands exactly because he will change them to fit my sinfulness, allowing me to easier follow what have essentially become my commands, rather than his. We end up with a theology that detracts significantly in regards to God’s sovereignty, as if we have significant control of his actions, and he changes his mind constantly.*

\*\*(a) We need to look at the human factors, because God worked through these human factors; they are key to understanding what God said.

(b) We cannot say it is implausible that God would change his commands to make them easier to fit into his people’s sinfulness, because Jesus said God did so (Mark 10).

(c) Yes, there is certainly the danger that we settle for something lower than God’s real will for us. So we have to safeguard against that – which is also Jesus’ point in directing us to what God said “at the beginning.”

(d) I don’t have the impression from scripture that God is very concerned about his sovereignty in the short term. God is absolutely committed to achieving his long-term purpose, but he is quite happy to make compromises in the short term. I agree that this is not what one might have expected, but it seem to be the way scripture describes things.

*I have heard people say that no one changes God’s mind that does not intend for God to do something “good.” Is that a valid argument? After all Christians believe God is good already and not many of us believes that we could convince God to do something “not good.” Yet if God sometimes intends one thing and is convinced to do something else then both outcomes must be in some way “good” even if they seem at the outset to be destructive.*

\*\*It’s a good point that God is having to decide between two good things—casting off (which is good because it’s just) and forgiving (which is good because it’s merciful). You can also safeguard God’s sovereignty by including the idea that God is giving Moses opportunity to implore God to do what God anyway plans to do, but again I don’t think Scripture feels that need.

*Although God seems to have conceded to Moses’ request in sparing the Israelites for their sin, it still remains the case that Moses took it upon himself to execute judgment and then, despite, his pleading with God, God unswervingly vowed to punish those Israelites who sinned.*

\*\*Yes, that’s a good point—it reflects the fact that both possible actions are good, and in the chapters as a whole God is having to find a way that does justice to the need for chastisement and the need for mercy (again, like a parent).

*It seems that one must find a way to live with the tension between two understandings of God, neither of which is truly satisfactory by itself. On the one hand, it is attractive to think of God as listening to the requests of petitioners, since it seems crucial to believe that there is some meaning in our intercessions on behalf of other people. According to this understanding, God would function much like a good human parent, who offers guidance and direction, while nonetheless taking seriously the input offered by his children. Yet on the other hand, God is not simply a good human parent, and there is a sense in which we feel as though God ought not to need our input in order to do what is best. The idea that God’s remembering of the divine promises and goals is contingent upon reminders offered by fallible human beings seems to bespeak an arrangement that is too fragile to offer any comfort or assurance. Perhaps this reaction arises simply from a desire to shirk the sort of responsibility that such a view would imply, yet I still wonder about what the necessity of intercession implies about the nature of God’s justice.* \*\*I’d say that one of the points about reading the Bible is to learn to grow in our understanding of God and have our understanding of God corrected by scripture. It looks to me as if the Bible portrays God as not needing our input but wanting it. Scripture also shows God as committed and powerful enough to overcome any of the possible “fragility” of the way God relates to us. Cross and resurrection are the superb evidences of that. As to the nature of God’s justice: it looks to me clear from scripture and human experience that God chooses to work via human beings and to risk the consequences of that…  
   
*This story suggests that our petitions to God may cause God not to destroy someone and have mercy; something he would not have done without our requests. Is God’s display of mercy dependent on our asking him, even on behalf of others?*

\*\*There are several passages of Scripture that suggest it: see e.g., the prayers of Amos. It doesn’t seem different in principle from the way people come to believe in Jesus only if believers tell them about Jesus.  
   
*I think most, if not all, true believers would cherish face to face interactions with God that were similar to those Moses experienced in his tent. However, like Moses, how would we handle God’s request to do something outside of our comfort zone. Ultimately, Moses stepped up to the challenge but how many of us could truly be God’s intercessors? We are all encouraged (? obligated?) to pray for one another but does this make each one of us an intercessor? I personally would be afraid of offending God by questioning his decisions but is this part of God’s challenge to us? Does he want is to think more critically about how God is working in our lives? What set the prophets and intercessors of the Old Testament apart? Was it their faith and strong personalities? We don’t read much about their lives before God called them. What were they like? Who are God’s intercessors today? Is it the collective church?*

\*\*I assume the church as a whole has that prophetic position through the presence of the Spirit.

*If God considers, changes his mind, gets sad, happy, angry, might even pout (certainly regrets), nurtures, cares, and pours out wrath often with little provocation, then God is far more anthropomorphic than we might originally have thought. At the core, this understanding of God is basically empirical: as we encounter the world, we find that it is fickle and unpredictable and at the same time steady and unchanging. God is the divine reflection of this observation—loyally loving, but prone to occasional bouts of divine punishment (I suppose I should say that the creation is a reflection of God’s character).*

\*\*Yes, though I don’t want to imply that this understanding is of empirical origin, only that empirical observation fits with it.

## God’s Presence…

*Why is God’s presence in Exodus so different from anything today? I typically point to the new work of the Holy Spirit but this can seem a copout.*

\*\*Maybe it’s less different than we think, or there is good news here. E.g., the fact that God is present in the tabernacle is a fact, not a feeling – it is independent of feelings. It is a fact that God is in the room with me as I type – God is not merely within my heart. We are so preoccupied by feelings and the internal. And maybe we do recognize the difference – it’s analogous to the fact that we do not experience the physical presence of Jesus. That was tied to a particular moment in the outworking of God’s purpose.

How do we look to these chapters to understand God’s presence when so many of the “rules” have seemed to change – the sacrificial system, the tent of meeting, God’s presence contained to one place, God’s presence contained to one people group, etc? Isn’t the idea and realization of God’s presence so different that it is hard to make a comparison from these chapters to today?

\*\*Is it so different? Don't we work with the same issues? We call a church a sanctuary or the house of God, the word for the tent of meeting or temple. We have sacraments such as Holy Communion (well, some Christians do). We reckon the presence of God is especially real for one group of people ("Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I"). We say after a good service, "The Lord was really there." We say "I had a sense of the Lord's presence" - implying we do not always have that. So I reckon it's worth working with the assumption that there are things for us to learn from here about what we mean by God's presence.

*The God we meet in these chapters of Exodus seems very different than the God we meet in Genesis. In Genesis, God communicates with people directly, even when they sin. Here, the fear of God and his holiness is emphasized. Why the change? Why the difference?*

\*\*Is it that there are those two sides to God and they come out in different contexts? And/or, when you have had God’s grace and love made clear, God can go on to emphasize holiness?

Why does it say that the Lord speaks to Moses face to face (33:11), and then says that no one might be able to see God’s face and live (33:20)?

\*\*Because there is a sense in which you can see God and a sense in which you can't. These are examples of the nuanced way the text speak of the presence of God. To look at God would be like looking at the sun—it would blind us. Yet we sing "I want to see you," because talk of seeing can also be a metaphor for experiencing the presence. It’s necessary to affirm that Moses really is in God’s presence, yet also that he is protected from the kind of seeing that would mean blindness.

*What is God’s “back” which Moses can see (but not God’s face)?*

\*\*If we are to think of God appearing in quasi-human form (as the story is picturing it), then a human being’s back as they leave is less dazzling than their face as you look directly at them.

*Many people claim that some of the Torah’s symbols, figures, and ritual practices anticipate Jesus (e.g., the paschal lamb story in Exodus foreshadows Jesus). However, studying the Torah I have become suspicious of such claims. Just reading the Torah alone, it is impossible to find an evidence of Jesus Christ residing within Torah’s text.*

Yes!

*Moreover, Paul often connects the OT’s and his own idea, but connects them inappropriately. For instance, in 2 Corinthians 3:12, Paul states that “not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside.” This exegesis of Exodus 34:29-35 seems not fitting with Exodus story.*

Yes! But that’s OK – the Holy Spirit guided him in that.

*How exactly did Christ do away with all of the requirements of the Torah? In what way can we now enter into God’s presence and have all of the requirements met? Is all of this simply a type and shadow of what we see in Jesus?*

*\*\**The basis of a relationship with God was always God’s grace and love and promise and act of deliverance—acts of obedience and rites are a response to that starting point. As the one true Israelite, Jesus fulfilled all God’s expectations of humanity and of Israel, and gave himself to God as the ultimate expression of self-offering. That set Israel’s relationship with God on a new basis, or rather returned it to the emphasis it had in God’s relationship with Abraham, when the relationship was based on God’s promise and Abraham’s trust in that promise (see Rom 4). This act was also associated with God’s purpose to reach out to the Gentiles, who can relate to God on that same basis. Both Jews and Gentiles are committed to a total obedience to God on the basis of what God did for them in Christ, but for Gentiles that never involved obedience to the Jewish law, and for Jews it now need not involve it.

*Why do some people not experience God’s presence?*\*\*What do we mean by “experiencing God’s presence”? Do we mean “having a sense that God is there”? If so, it’s not a question Exodus says anything about—and it is surely not a question that the rest of the OT or the NT are very interested in. Experience in that sense is a modern Western concern. Exodus is concerned with the fact that God is there, which is different from a feeling that God is there. So Israel as a whole experiences the fact that God is there when (e.g.) they experience God rescuing them at the Reed Sea and providing water for them on the way to Sinai and when they hear and see what is happening on the mountain. In Exodus whether people go into the presence of God depends partly on God’s purpose for the people as a whole and on God’s purpose for the world. Moses has experiences of being in God’s presence that do not happen to other people, because of what God intends to do through Moses—it doesn’t say anything about whether Moses is more spiritual than anyone else.  
  
*It seems like scripture rarely comes out and says plainly what it means, it’s always symbolic or metaphorical. Why is that?*\*\*There are quite a lot of things that God says straight, aren’t there? E.g., the exodus story or the content of the instructions in Exodus 20—24. But there are indeed lots of times when it is symbolic and metaphorical. The main reason is that most really deep questions about God and life don’t have straightforward answers. They are deep and complex. So metaphorical and symbolic (and story) answers are the best ones to convey the truth.