Primary Sources: The Code of Hammurabi

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Editor’s Note: The Code of Hammurabi is one of the first law codes in history. It was created around 1750 B.C., about 3,750 years ago, in ancient Babylon. Today, Babylon is a city in Iraq. Only one nearly complete example of the Code exists today. The Code is inscribed on a 7-foot stone tablet in the Akkadian language in the cuneiform script. It is in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

Hammurabi was the sixth king of Babylon. His code contained 282 laws. Hammurabi claimed it was given to him by the Sun God, Shamash, and that his right to rule came from Marduk, the main god of Babylon.
The Code deals with laws that people might see today, like how much a driver or a surgeon should be paid. Other laws established what a builder would owe for a house that collapses. Part of the code deals with family relationships, such as inheritance, marriage, divorce and children. The Code has different rules for the three classes of Babylonian society: property
owners, freed men and slaves. For example, if a doctor killed a rich patient, he would have his hands cut off, but if he killed a slave, he would pay only a fine. Below are laws from Hammurabi's Code.

The Prologue

Anu the Sublime, king of the Anunaki, and Bel, the lord of Heaven and Earth, made Babylon great on earth. Then Anu and Bel told me to bring justice to the land. They told me to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers so that the strong should not harm the weak.

Marduk sent me to rule over men and protect them with justice. I did what was right and brought about the well-being of the oppressed.
Code Of Laws

1. If a man accuses another man of a very serious crime but cannot prove it, he shall be put to death.
2. If a man accuses a man of sorcery and cannot prove it, the accused shall go to the river and shall throw himself in. If he drowns, he is a sorcerer, and his accuser shall take his house and property. If he is unharmed, the accuser shall be charged with sorcery and be put to death. The innocent man shall also take the house and property of his accuser.

3. If a man lies in court in a case involving a death sentence, he shall be put to death.

4. If a man is bribed to lie in court, he shall be punished.

15. If a man helps a slave of the palace or a slave of a free man to escape the city, he shall be put to death.

21. If a man breaks a hole in a house, he shall be put to death in front of that hole. Then he shall be pushed into it.

22. If a man is a brigand (member of a gang of robbers) and attacks people who are traveling, he shall be put to death.

25. If a fire breaks out and the man who puts it out steals furniture, he shall be thrown into that fire.

26. If the king sends a man to go on an errand and he hires a substitute, he shall be put to death.

138. If a man divorces a wife who has not given him children, he shall give her back the dowry in her marriage settlement. (A dowry or marriage settlement is money or goods she brings to the marriage.)

142. If a woman decides she does not like her husband anymore, she must give her reasons. If she is not at fault, but he leaves and neglects her, he shall give her back the dowry. Then she can go back to her father’s house.

195. If a son strikes his father, they shall cut off his fingers.

196. If a man destroys the eye of another man, his eye shall be destroyed.

197. If one man breaks another man’s bone, they shall break his bone.

200. If a man knocks out a tooth of a man of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth.

202. If a man strikes a man who is of a higher rank, he shall receive 60 strokes with an oxtail in public.

229. If a builder builds a house and it collapses and kills the owner, the builder shall be put to death.

265. This law deals with a herdsman who is hired to watch sheep or cattle. If he lies about the number of sheep or cattle that have been born or sells them, he shall pay the owner 10 times the amount.

282. If a male slave says to his master: “You are not my master,” his master shall cut off his ear.
The Epilogue

These are the laws of justice which Hammurabi, the wise king, established. In my deep wisdom, I have made sure that the strong might not injure the weak. I have protected the widows and orphans, I have settled all disputes, and healed all injuries. These are my precious words, written upon my memorial stone.

Let the oppressed, who have a case at law, come and stand before me, as the king of justice; let him read my code, and understand my precious words: he will find out what is just and fair, and his heart will be glad.
Quiz

1. Select the law that explains how Hammurabi’s Code allows a woman to leave her husband.
   (A) 26
   (B) 138
   (C) 142
   (D) 195

2. According to Hammurabi’s Code, people are usually given a punishment that is exactly like their crime.
   Which law BEST supports the idea outlined above?
   (A) 1. If a man accuses another man of a very serious crime but cannot prove it, he shall be put to death.
   (B) 1. If a man accuses a man of sorcery and cannot prove it, the accused shall go to the river and shall throw himself in. If he drowns, he is a sorcerer, and his accuser shall take his house and property. If he is unharmed, the accuser shall be charged with sorcery and be put to death. The innocent man shall also take the house and property of his accuser.
   (C) 1. If a man breaks a hole in a house, he shall be put to death in front of that hole. Then he shall be pushed into it.
   (D) 1. If a man destroys the eye of another man, his eye shall be destroyed.

3. Read the sentence from the section “Code Of Laws.”

   If a man knocks out a tooth of a man of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth.

   Which option is the best definition of the word “rank” as used in the sentence?
   (A) an ordered list
   (B) a position in society
   (C) a line of people
   (D) a position in the military
Read the sentence from law 15, in the section "Code Of Laws."

*If a man helps a slave of the palace or a slave of a free man to escape the city, he shall be put to death.*

Which two words would BEST replace "helps" and "escape" in the excerpt above?

(A) assists; flee

(B) improves; avoid

(C) aids; elude

(D) advises; break free
Answer Key

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