

Hammurabi's Code



Historical Background:

More than 3,500 years ago, Hammurabi, king of the Babylonian Empire, ordered scribes to chisel a code of 282 laws onto a tall column of black stone. The column also featured an introduction explaining the intent of the code and a summary of Hammurabi's kingly deeds. As you read these laws from the code, think about how Mesopotamians defined crimes and how criminals were punished.

Before this portrait let every man who has a legal dispute come forward, read this text, and heed its precious words. The stone tablet will enlighten him in his trouble, and thus may he find justice and breathe easier in his heart, speaking these words: "Hammurabi is a king who cares for his people like a loving father."

- 1** If a man bring an accusation against a man, and charge him with a capital crime, but cannot prove it he, the accuser, shall be put to death.
- 48** If a man owe a debt and Adad (a god) inundate his field and carry away the produce or through lack of water, grain have not grown in the field in that year he shall not make any return of grain to the creditor he shall alter his contract-tablet and he shall not pay the interest for that entire year.
- 53** If a man neglect to strengthen his dike and do not strengthen it and a break be made in his dike and the water carry away the farmland the man in whose dike the break had been made shall restore the grain, which he has damaged.
- 54** If he were not able to restore the grain, they shall sell him and his goods, and the farmers who grain the water has carried away shall share the results of the sale.
- 113** If a man hold a debt of grain or money against a man, and if he take grain without the consent of the owner from the heap or the granary they shall call that man to account for taking grain without the consent of the owner from the heap or the granary and he shall return as much grain as he took and he shall forfeit all that he has lent whatever it be.
- 148** If a man takes a wife and she become afflicted with disease and if he set his face to take another he may. His wife who is afflicted with disease he shall not put away. She shall remain in the house that he has built and he shall maintain her as long as she lives.
- 149** If that woman does not elect to remain in her husband's house he shall make good to her the dowry that she brought from her father's house and she may go.
- 153** If a woman brings about the death of her husband for the sake of another man, they shall impale her.
- 195** If a son strikes his father, they shall cut off his hand.
- 196** If a man destroys the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye.
- 197** If one breaks a 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.
- 201** If he knocks out a tooth of a client (man of lower class) he shall pay 1/3 mina of silver.
- 218** If a physician operate on a man for a severe wound with a bronze lancet (surgical knife) and cause the man's death; or open an abscess (in the eye) of a man with a bronze lancet and destroy the man's eye they shall cut off his hand.
- 219** If a physician make a large incision in the slave owned by a freed man, and kill him, he shall replace the slave with another slave.
- 220** If he had opened a tumor with the operating knife, and put out his eye, he shall pay half his value.
- 225** If he operate on an ox or a donkey for a severe wound and cause its death, he shall give the owner of the ox or donkey one-fourth its value.
- 229** If a builder build a house for a man and do not make its construction firm, and the house that he has built collapse and cause the death of the owner of the house, that builder shall be put to death.
- 250** If a bull, when passing through the street, gores a man and brings about his death, the case has no penalty.

I, Hammurabi, who was a perfect king to the downtrodden people entrusted to me by the god Enlil, I who was by Marduk's order, their shepherd, have never tarried, never rested. I gave the people beautiful places, kept all pressing needs far away, and made their lives easier. With the mighty weapons given me by the gods Zababa and Ishtar, with the wisdom granted me by Ea, with the powers I hold from Marduk, I wiped out enemies on every side, put an end to wars, brought prosperity to our land, allowed men to live in peace and let no one fall upon them or harass them. I was called by the great gods, wherefore I became the good shepherd whose staff is straight. My righteous shadow has stretched across my city. I have gathered Sumer and Akkade in my arms that they might thrive under my protection; I shield them in my peace and protect them in my wisdom. That the strong might receive their due, here in Babylon...have I inscribed my precious words on a memorial stone and erected my statue as King of Justice!