

Debate Hammurabi's Code

The laws of Babylonian king Hammurabi (1728–1686 B.C.) are among the oldest recorded. These laws, known as Hammurabi's Code, were engraved on a huge stone pillar that stood in a temple in Babylon. The pillar was excavated in the early 20th century. At its top is a carved picture of Hammurabi receiving the code of laws from the sun god, Shamash, who was also the god of justice. Hammurabi claimed the gods called on him "to make justice visible in the land." He was to "destroy the wicked person and the evil-doer, so that the strong may not injure the weak."

Below the picture and written introduction are 282 laws, organized into subjects such as family, property, religion, military, farming, trade, slavery, and business. They cover a wide range of offenses in each area. Hammurabi tried to choose laws that were fair, important to his people, and that did not conflict with each other. However, different standards of justice applied to different people.

At the bottom of the pillar, Hammurabi advised his successors to uphold the laws by stating that those who did would be blessed and that those who changed them would suffer. "May the mighty gods of heaven and earth curse him. May his land, his warriors, his people, and his nation be cursed."

Some of the laws are described below.

- If a man is robbed and the robber is not caught, the local government will compensate the victim.
- If a man's wife squanders his money and makes him poor, he may divorce her without paying any divorce money.
- The wife and children of a man are his property. To pay his debts, he may sell them into slavery for up to three years.
- If a man accuses another of murder and can't prove it, the accuser may be put to death.
- A man who assaults another and puts out his eye shall have his own eye put out.
- A son who strikes his father shall have his hand cut off.
- A surgeon who operates on a freeman and causes him to die shall have his hand cut off.
- A farmer who carelessly floods his neighbor's fields during irrigation shall pay for the ruined crops.
- If a commoner strikes a nobleman, he shall be whipped in public as an example to others.
- If a commoner strikes another commoner, he shall pay a fine equal to about 30 ounces of silver coins.
- If a commoner strikes a slave, a small fine shall be assessed.

The Debate

Find a copy of Hammurabi's Code and read it. Divide into groups and debate the pros and cons of the laws. Compare the laws with the various codes of conduct of modern societies.

- Were they appropriate for the time period?
- How were they fair and unfair?
- Which people were favored by the laws and which were not?
- How are they similar to or different from the Ten Commandments and other codes of conduct?
- Have society's problems changed or remained the same?