

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 (as a slave) and his goods, and the farmers whose 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 Akkadia 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!

Edicts of King Ashoka

Ashoka's reign: 269 BCE to 232 BCE

They are a collection of 33 inscriptions on the Pillars of Ashoka as well as boulders and cave walls made by the Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire during his reign from 269 BCE to 232 BCE. These inscriptions were dispersed throughout the Maurya Empire.

Instruction to Administrators

The high officers of this region, in charge of administration of the city, are to be addressed as follows at the command of King Ashoka:

Whatever vision I have, I want to see carried out in practice and fulfilled by proper means. And I regard giving instruction to you as the principle means to this end. For you are placed over thousands of beings for the purpose of earning the people's affection.

All people are as my children. Just as I desire that my own children may be provided with complete welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, so do I desire the same for all people. Most of you do not understand how far this matter goes. Some do understand this, but only partially.

See to it then, since you are well provided for. If in the course of administration it happens that a person dies because of imprisonment or torture, many other people are also deeply injured by this. You must insist that a middle path be followed in matters of justice.

But you surely won't achieve success with any of the following attitudes: envy, impetuosity, cruelty, impatience, want of application, laziness or lethargy. You should wish of yourselves: "May I not have these attitudes."

The root of the matter, indeed, is patience and steadfastness.

One who is lethargic in administration will not rise up; but you should rouse yourselves, get going, and move forward.

The Practice of Dhamma (the teaches of Buddha)

For the past several hundred years the sacrificial slaughter of animals, cruelty towards living beings, and the improper treatment of relatives and teachers have all increased.

But today, because of King Ashoka's practice of Dhamma, the sound of the war drum has become the call (not to arms but) to Dhamma.

And to a degree unseen for several hundred years past, through the edicts of King Ashoka, the slaughter of animals has ceased, non-violence towards living beings is practiced, and relatives, teachers, parents and elders are all treated with proper respect.

These and many other kinds of Dhamma practice have increased. And King Ashoka will further increase this practice of Dhamma, as will his sons, grandsons and great-grandsons, in every era. And not only will they practice Dhamma through virtuous conduct, but they will all also teach Dhamma for teaching Dhamma is the most important work that can be done.

Glory and Fame

King Ashoka does not regard glory or fame as bringing much gain. Whatever glory or fame he desires, it would be only for this: That the people in the present time and in the future might practice in accordance with Dhamma, and conform to the observances of Dhamma.

For this purpose alone does the King wish for glory or fame. And what little he exerts himself, it is all for future generations, and in order that all beings may be free from the bondage of wrong-doing. Indeed, this is difficult to achieve by those of low rank or high rank, — except by strenuous effort and renunciation. But of these [two], it is more difficult for the person of high rank to achieve.