4c. Hammurabi's Code: An Eye for an Eye

"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

This phrase, along with the idea of written laws, goes back to ancient Mesopotamian culture that prospered long before the Bible was written or the civilizations of the Greeks or Romans flowered.

"An eye for an eye ..." is a paraphrase of Hammurabi's Code, a collection of 282 laws inscribed on an upright stone pillar called a stele. The code was found by French archaeologists in 1901 while excavating the ancient city of Susa, which is in modern-day Iran.

Hammurabi is the best known and most celebrated of all Mesopotamian kings. He ruled the Babylonian Empire from 1792-50 B.C.E. Although he was concerned with keeping order in his kingdom, this was not his only reason for compiling the list of laws. When he began ruling the city-state of Babylon, he had control of no more than 50 square miles of territory. As he conquered other city-states and his empire grew, he saw the need to unify the various groups he controlled.

A Need for Justice

Hammurabi keenly understood that, to achieve this goal, he needed one universal set of laws for all of the diverse peoples he conquered. Therefore, he sent legal experts throughout his kingdom to gather existing laws. These laws were reviewed and some were changed or eliminated before compiling his final list of 282 laws. Despite what many people believe, this code of laws was not the first.

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<th>Oldest Code Known</th>
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<td>The oldest known evidence of a law code are tablets from the ancient city Ebla (Tell Mardikh in modern-day Syria). They date to about 2400 B.C.E. — approximately 600 years before Hammurabi put together his famous code.</td>
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The prologue or introduction to the list of laws is very enlightening. Here, Hammurabi states that he wants "to make justice visible in the land, to destroy the wicked person and the evil-doer, that the strong might not injure the weak." The laws themselves support this compassionate claim, and protect widows, orphans and others from being harmed or exploited.

The phrase "an eye for an eye" represents what many people view as a harsh sense of justice based on revenge. But, the entire code is much more complex than that one phrase.

The code also gives rules for family matters, such as marriage, divorce...and adoption. Payment amounts for the work of doctors and other professionals are outlined. Although the pay for doctors was good, they suffered severe punishments for fatal errors. The code states that "if a physician make a large incision with the operating knife, and kill him... his hands shall be cut off."
The Code covers all types of issues related to farming and herding animals, and it also lays out rules on the ownership and sale of slaves.

From the code, it is evident that the Babylonians did not believe all people were equal. The code treated slaves, commoners, and nobles differently. Women had a number of rights, including the ability to buy and sell property and to obtain a divorce. The Babylonians understood the need for honesty by all parties in a trial and for court officers to be free of corruption so that the justice system could function effectively.

Hammurabi's Code serves as a window into the prevailing values of ancient Babylon.