

Ancient Legal Parallels

As societies became larger and more complex, rulers had to find ways to maintain order and harmony. They did this primarily through the creation of laws. One of the earliest and most well-known set of laws was compiled by King Hammurabi—Hammurabi’s Code—in the 18th century BCE. These laws were carved onto a stone pillar and can still be viewed today at the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

Other societies also developed legal codes and were likely influenced by Hammurabi’s Code. This is the case with ancient Israel. The Israelite collection of laws was compiled much later, probably in the 7th-6th century BCE. Many of these laws can be found in the Hebrew Bible. When you put Hammurabi’s laws side-by-side with laws from ancient Israel, you’ll notice many similarities as well as some important differences.

Instructions: Read through the following sets of laws and answer the questions on the reverse side of the page.

1. Topic: stealing livestock

Hammurabi’s Code, article 8

If a citizen steals an ox or a sheep from a state or temple official, then the citizen is fined thirty times the value of the stolen livestock. Likewise, if one citizen steals an ox or a sheep from another [citizen of equal standing], then the fine is 10 times the value of the stolen livestock. If a citizen fails to pay a fine for stealing livestock, then the sentence is death.

Hebrew Bible, Exodus 21:37; 22:2-3

When a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. If he [the man who has stolen the animal] **lacks the means**—he shall **be sold** for his theft. But if what he stole—whether an ox...or sheep—is found alive in his possession, he shall pay double.

lacks the means: doesn’t have enough livestock or money

be sold: the thief is sold into slavery in order to pay the fine; he must then work to regain his freedom

2. Topic: escaped slaves

Hammurabi’s Code, articles 16-17

If a citizen harbors slaves who have run away from the state or from a household, and if the citizen disobeys a court order to **extradite** them, then the sentence is death. If a citizen captures a runaway slave...and returns the slave to the owner, then a reward of one-third ounce of silver is paid by the owner to the citizen [who has captured and returned the slave].

extradite: return

Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 23:16-17

You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master. He shall live with you in any place he may choose...you must not **ill-treat** him.

ill-treat: oppress or hurt

3. Topic: kidnapping

Hammurabi's Code, article 14

If a citizen kidnaps and sells a member of another [citizen's] household into slavery, then the sentence is death.

Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 24:19-22

He who kidnaps a man—whether he has sold him or is still holding him—shall be put to death.

Questions:

1. **What do you notice first** as you read through these laws? What seems interesting or unusual?
2. Where do you see **similarities** between the laws of Hammurabi and the laws of the ancient Israelites?
3. Where do you notice **differences**? Look closely at the times of crimes, the status of the people committing the crimes, and the types of punishments that are indicated?
4. Based on your observations, what types of **conclusions** might you draw about the societies in which these laws were created?

The translations in this exercise are from:

JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: the Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation--Second Edition. Jewish Publication Society, 2000.

Matthews, Victor Harold, and Don C. Benjamin. *Old Testament Parallels Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*. New York:

Paulist Press, 1997.