WHO WAS HAMMURABI AND WHAT IS “THE CODE”?

By the early fourth millennium B.C., the population along the Tigris - Euphrates rivers increased and city-states arose. By 2000 BC the cities of Sumer had grown so large that some like Ur, the capital city, had populations more than 200,000 persons.

Hammurabi (ca. 1792 - 1750 BC) united all of Mesopotamia under his forty-three year reign of Babylon. Although Hammurabi's Code is not the first code of laws (the first records date four centuries earlier), it is the best preserved legal document reflecting the social structure of Babylon during Hammurabi's rule.

Two hundred eighty-two 282 laws, concerning a wide variety of abuses, justify Hammurabi's claim of having acted "like a real father to his people . . . [who] has established prosperity . . . and (gave) good government to the land."

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 Code of Hammurabi is one of the oldest and longest deciphered writings in existence.

CODE noun \ kōd\

1: a systematic statement of a body of law; especially: one given statutory force

2: a system of principles or rules

These rules covered everything from the way people conducted business to punishments for people who broke the law. The code was inscribed onto a finger-shaped black stone pillar, which was a four-ton slab of diorite. At its top is a two-and-a-half-foot carving of Hammurabi getting a measuring rod and tape from the Babylonian god of justice. The measuring rod and tape represent the law.

In addition to laws and punishments, the code also established a minimum wage for workers. It also includes one of the earliest examples of the presumption of innocence.

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.

The laws were discovered in 1901 on a stela now in the Louvre Museum of Paris, France.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

You be the Judge

Below are situations Hammurabi faced. Decide what you think to be a fair way to deal with the problem.

1. What should be done to the carpenter who builds a house that falls and kills the owner?
2. What happens if a man is unable to pay his debts?
3. What should happen to a boy who slaps his father?
4. What happens to the wine seller who fails to arrest bad characters gathered at her shop?
5. How is the truth determined when one man brings an accusation against another?
6. What should happen if one person pokes out the eye of another person?
7. What should happen if a man of a lower rank strikes someone of a higher rank?

1. What should happen to a man who knocks out the teeth of his equal
2. What should happen if a neighbor accidentally floods his neighbor’s fields?
3. What should happen if someone is robbed but the robber is not caught? How will the person who was robbed be treated?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

After reading – what 2 principles of our American court system have roots in Hammurabi’s Code?

What facts from the reading reflect Babylonia’s social structure?

* If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.
* If any man should strike a man of higher rank, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip.

If any one open his ditches to water his crop, but is careless, and the water flood the field of his neighbor,

then he shall pay his neighbor corn for his loss.

According to Hammurabi:

If a builder builds a house for a man and does not make its construction sound, and the house which he has built collapses and causes the death of the owner of the house, the builder shall be put to death.

If a man be in debt and is unable to pay his creditors, he shall sell his wife, son, or daughter, or bind them over to service. For three years they shall work in the houses of their purchaser or master; in the fourth year they shall be given their freedom.

If bad characters gather in the house of a wine seller and she does not arrest those characters and bring them to the palace, that wine seller shall be put to death.

If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.

If any one bring an accusation against a man, and the accused go to the river and leap into the river, if he sink in the river his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river prove that the accused is not guilty, and he escape unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser.