

THE HAMMURABI STELE

Partially Retold in English

by

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In the following selections, I have frequently changed the grammar and sequence of words from that of the original text, and I have omitted sections of material, so that what is given will read comprehensibly in English. I have grouped regulations by topical categories for discussion, rather than simply following their numerical sequence.

Detail of the top of the Hammurabi Stele, picturing King Hammurabi coming before the god Shamash



Marduk and Hammurabi

**(1) When the deities of old
who allot the destinies of the world,
Gave the rule of human beings to Marduk,
set him over all other deities,
(5) made Babylon the foremost city-state in all the earth
and the capital of an everlasting kingdom,
with foundations laid strong as those of heaven and earth,
At that time I, Hammurabi,
the pious, god-fearing prince,**

**(10) was called forth by name for the welfare of the people:
To cause justice to appear in the world,
to destroy the evil and the wicked
so that the strong should not oppress the weak,
and to rise like Shamash to give light to the land.**

**(15) I, Hammurabi, the shepherd,
have gathered abundance and plenty,
have stormed the four quarters of the world,
have magnified the fame of Babylon,
and have elated the mind of Marduk my lord.**

**(20) To me has been given the authority,
and I have been faithful to Shamash.
I am like a god among kings,
endued with knowledge and wisdom.
I have provided plentiful offerings for the deities
(25) and built their temples.
I am pure of mind,
and the deities listen to my prayers.
I am the wise ruler
who bears the responsibility of government,
(30) who has attained the source of wisdom,
who has enlarged the kingdom,
and who has established pure sacrifices for ever.
I am first of all kings;
I have conquered all peoples.
(35) I am the shepherd of the people
who causes the truth to appear,
guiding my flock rightly.
I am the pious prince,
deep in prayer to the great deities.**

**(40) I am the mighty king, the sun of Babylon,
who causes light to appear in the land,
who brings all the world to obedience.
I am the favorite of the deities.
When Marduk commanded me
(45) to establish justice for the people of the land
and to provide orderly government,
I set forth truth and justice throughout the land,
and caused the people to prosper.**

Regulations

1. Social Structures

- 196. If a free person puts out the eye of another free person, that person's eye shall be put out.
- 197. If a free person breaks the bone of another free person, that person's bone shall be broken.
- 198. If a free person puts out the eye or breaks the bone of a civil-servant, that person shall pay one-half kilogram of silver.
- 199. If a free person puts out the eye or breaks the bone of another free person's slave, that person shall pay half the value of the slave.

- 195. If a son strikes his father, his hand shall be cut off.
- 205. If a free person's slave strikes the cheek of another free person, the ear of the slave shall be cut off.
- 282. If a slave says to the master, "you are not my master," the master shall cut off the slave's ear.

- 138. If a free man wishes to divorce his wife who has had no children, he must pay her a settlement equal to the value of the gifts he gave her father when they were married plus the dowry she brought from her father's house; by paying this settlement he divorces her.

- 139. If the free man had given her father no gifts, this part of his settlement shall amount to one-half kilogram of silver.
- 140. If the man is a civil-servant, he shall pay one-sixth of a kilogram of silver.
- 141. If a free man's wife wishes to divorce him, the man may divorce her and give her no settlement. If the man does not wish to divorce her, he may marry another woman and keep his first wife in his house as a slave.
- 142. If a woman wishes to divorce her husband and refuses him sexual rights, an inquiry shall be held. If she has not committed adultery but her husband has, she may take her dowry and return to her father's house.
- 143. If she has committed adultery, then she shall be executed by being thrown into the water.

- 154. If a free man has sexual relations with his daughter, that man shall be exiled.
- 157. If a free man has sexual relations with his mother after the death of his father, both of them shall be executed by burning.
- 158. If a free man has sexual relations with his father's first wife, who is the mother of sons, after the death of his father, that man shall lose his paternal inheritance.

- 159. If the first wife and a female slave of a free man both bear him sons,

and the father acknowledges the sons of the female slave as his own, then the sons of the female slave shall share equally with the sons of the first wife in the paternal inheritance after the death of the father.

●171. If the father did not acknowledge the sons of the female slave as his own, then the sons have no right to share in the paternal inheritance; but both the female slave and her sons shall be given their freedom.

2. Economic Structures

●7. If a free person buys or receives in pawn anything from another free person who is a minor, or from a free person's slave, without a contract signed by witnesses, that person is a fence and shall be executed.

●122. If a free person wishes to pawn anything, that person is responsible for drawing up a contract signed by witnesses before completing the transaction.

●123. If a free person has pawned anything without a contract signed by witnesses, and the pawnbroker later claims not to have received anything, that case is not subject to claim.

●124. If a free person has pawned anything in front of witnesses (even if there is no contract), and the pawnbroker later claims not to have received anything, the pawnbroker must repay twice the amount denied.

●42. If a free person signs a contract to rent a field for cultivation but fails to raise a crop in the field, that person must pay the landlord an amount equivalent to the harvests of the adjoining fields.

●43. In addition, the renter who has neglected the field must plough it, so that another free person may rent and cultivate it.

●45. If a free person rents a field to a cultivator and is paid in advance, but later a natural disaster destroys the crop, the cultivator must stand the loss.

●46. If the rent was not paid in advance, the renter and the cultivator shall divide any crops that can be salvaged according to the proportion stipulated in their contract.

●48. If a free person is in debt and loses a crop because of a natural disaster, the contract shall be changed so that person will not owe the creditor any interest for the year.

●88. A merchant may collect interest of thirty-three and one-third per cent on a loan of grain, and twenty per cent interest may be charged on a loan of silver.

●89. If a free person who has borrowed cannot repay the loan with silver but can repay it with grain, the merchant who made the loan is obligated to accept the grain at the rate of exchange set by the king; if the merchant tries to raise the interest-rate, that merchant shall forfeit both the capital and the interest.

●92. If a merchant loans grain or silver at one rate but later tries to collect at a higher rate, that merchant shall forfeit both the capital and the interest.

- 215. If a surgeon performs a major operation which saves the life of a free person, that surgeon shall be paid eighty grams of silver.
- 217. If the person is a slave, the owner shall pay sixteen grams of silver to the surgeon.
- 221. If the surgeon set a broken bone of a free person, that surgeon shall be paid forty grams of silver.
- 223. If the person is a slave, the owner shall pay sixteen grams of silver to the surgeon.
- 228. If a carpenter builds a house for a free person, that carpenter shall be paid sixteen grams of silver for every thirty-five square meters of the house.
- 234. If a shipwright has caulked a ship with a carrying capacity of three hundred liters for a free person, that shipwright shall be paid sixteen grams of silver.

3. The Operation of the Judicial System

- 3. If a free person commits perjury during a murder-trial and the perjury is discovered, that person shall be executed.
- 4. If a free person commits perjury during a damage suit, that person will be liable for the damages.
- 1. If a free person accuses another free person of murder but cannot prove the charge in court, the one who made the accusation shall be executed.
- 127. If a free person accuses a priestess or a married woman of illicit sexual relations but cannot prove the charge, that free person shall be publicly flogged and half of that free person's head shall be shaved.
- 5. If a judge delivers a written verdict and later changes it, that judge shall pay twelve times the amount of the damages awarded in the verdict. Then the judge shall be publicly expelled from office.

4. The Rule of Law

- 14. If a free person kidnaps the son of another free person, the kidnapper shall be executed.
- 15. If a free person helps a slave of either a palace or a civil-servant escape, that person shall be executed.
- 16. If a free person gives shelter to a fugitive slave of either a palace or a civil-servant, that person shall be executed.
- 25. If a fire breaks out in a free person's house and another free person who went to extinguish the fire saw, wanted, and looted any of the property in the house, the looter shall be executed by being thrown into that fire.

- 109. If rebels meet in a bar and the woman who owns the bar does not capture them and take them to the palace, that woman shall be executed.
- 125. If a priestess who does not live in the temple owns and operates a bar or even enters a bar for drink, that priestess shall be executed by burning.
- 229. If a carpenter has erected a poorly constructed house, so that the walls cave in and kill the homeowner, that carpenter shall be executed.
- 230. If the poorly constructed house causes the death of the homeowner's son, the carpenter's son shall be executed.
- 231. If the poorly constructed house causes the death of the homeowner's slave, the carpenter shall provide an equivalent slave for the homeowner.
- 232. If the poorly constructed house causes the destruction of the homeowner's property, the carpenter shall replace whatever has been destroyed; if the entire house caves in, the carpenter shall rebuild it free of charge.

5. The Doing of Justice

- 6. If a free person steals sacred property from a temple or palace, that person shall be executed, along with anyone who purchased the stolen property.
 - 8. If a free person steals ordinary property, such as an ox or a sheep, from a temple or palace, that person shall repay thirty times the amount of the stolen property. If a free person steals the same type of property from a civil-servant, that person shall repay ten times. If a thief cannot pay, that thief shall be executed.
 - 22. If a free person robs another free person and is caught, that thief shall be executed.
 - 23. If the thief is not caught, the city of the free person who has been robbed shall pay for the loss.
 - 24. If the free person has been murdered [that is, robbed of life], the city shall pay one-half kilogram of silver to the relatives of the deceased.
 - 129. If the wife of a free man is caught lying with another man, they shall both be tied up and drowned in the water; but if the husband decides to let his wife live, then the king shall let the man live.
 - 250. If a free person's ox happens to gore another free person on the street so that the person dies, there is no cause of action.
 - 251. If the free person's ox is a habitual gorer, and the free person has been officially notified yet does not cover the horns of the ox or tie it up, then if the ox gores another free person so that the person dies, the owner of the ox shall pay one-fourth kilogram of silver to the relatives of the deceased.
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Hammurabi & Society

**(1) These are the regulations
which Hammurabi the able king has established
so that the world may enjoy stable and just government.
I, Hammurabi, have been called by the great deities.**

**(5) I am the shepherd
who brings well-being and abundant prosperity;
my rule is just.
So that the strong might not oppress the weak,
and that even the orphan and the widow might be treated with justice,**

**(10) I inscribed my precious words
on my stele called "King of Justice" in Babylon.**

**I am the king who is first of all kings;
my ability has no rival.**

**By the command of Shamash, who judges all the world,
(15) let justice now appear in the world.**

**By the word of Marduk my lord,
let no one mar the figures or words on my monument.
Let the oppressed person stand before my monument
and have the precious words of my inscription read aloud.**

**(20) Then that person's mind shall rest easy
in the knowledge that justice will be done.**

**To the end of time
let the kings of the world
follow the just words inscribed on my monument.**

**(25) Let no king alter the inscription
or erase the engraving.**

**May the kings who listen to my words
be blessed with empires as large as mine,
governing the world in justice.**

**(30) As for the kings who do not listen to my words,
may their destinies be cursed,
their kingdoms overthrown,
their people scattered,
and their very existence forgotten.**

**(35) Let these curses be unalterable,
and let them quickly overtake
the kings who do not listen to my words.**



Discussion Questions

The following questions require a close reading of the translation (and they show why I made my specific selections). The questions are organized according to the headings used above. In most of the sections, I first state questions in a specific form, then in a more general form.

Poem

What is the main point of the first part of the poem? Of the second part? What shift in emphasis occurs? How would you account for this shift? How does the first part reflect a mythological worldview? How does the second part reflect a mythological worldview? It could be argued that the poem promotes a different perspective than the regulations. Show how this could be the case. How does the poem as a whole help you understand the intention of the regulations?

Social Structures

How would you rank the three classes of society according to regulations 196-199? What do nos. 195, 205, and 282 suggest about the relative importance of relationships between family members and between classes? How would you assess the status of women in society on the basis of nos. 138-143? What significance would you attach to the different penalties in nos. 154 and 157-158? What do nos. 158, 159, and 171 tell you about the importance of motherhood?

How would you rank the three classes of Hammurabi's society? Are the relationships between family members more or less important than those between classes? How would you assess the status of women in Hammurabi's society?

Economic Structures

What differences and similarities do you see between regulation 7 and nos. 122-124? On the basis of these four regulations, how would you describe the importance of contracts in Hammurabi's society? In the regulations regarding land use (nos. 42-43, 45-46, and 48), who seems to be favored: the landlord or the cultivator? What two basic reasons for crop-failures are suggested in these regulations? What similarities and differences do you see in the provisions of nos. 45, 46, and 48? According to regulations 88-89 and 92, what is the incentive for investing capital? Why do you think the interest-rate is higher for grain than for silver in no. 88? What role does government play in nos. 89 and 92? What advantages and disadvantages do you see in the wage-control regulations (nos. 215, 217, 221, 223, 228, and 234)? What is the common element that ties together the work of the surgeon, the carpenter,

and the shipwright? Do you find any surprises in the structure of the fees given here? Do you think there is a minimum wage?

What was the value of contracts in Hammurabi's society? In the regulations regarding land use, who seems to be favored: the landlord or the cultivator? Why? What incentive does the Stele provide for investing capital? What role does the government play? What advantages and disadvantages do you see in the wage-control regulations?

The Operation of the Judicial System

What general principle could you derive from regulations 3 and 4 to apply to other instances of perjury? On what basis should accusations be made, according to nos. 1 and 127? What is the primary responsibility of the judge in no. 5? How would you summarize the aims of Hammurabi's judicial system? Does your summary agree with that given in the poem? How would you compare the aims of Hammurabi's system with the aims of our system? What general principle would Hammurabi apply to instances of perjury? On what basis should accusations be made? What is the primary responsibility of the judge? How would you summarize the aims of Hammurabi's judicial system? Does your summary agree with that given in the poem? How would you compare the aims of Hammurabi's system with the aims of our system?

The Rule of Law

Could you think of extenuating circumstances for the capital crimes described in regulations 14-16 and 25? What role does the intention of the criminal seem to play in these regulations? How would you assess the severity of the crimes mentioned in nos. 109 and 125? Why do you think Hammurabi considered them capital crimes? Nos. 229-232 exemplify a principle known as *lex talionis* (see also nos. 196-197). From your reading of these regulations, how would you define this principle? Do you think this same principle is operative in nos. 3-4? How would you argue for and against the justice of this principle? What view of children is implicit in no. 230?

Could you think of extenuating circumstances for the capital crimes described in regulations 14-16 and 25? What role does the intention of the criminal seem to play in these regulations? Regulations 229-232 exemplify a principle known as *lex talionis* (see also nos. 196-197). From your reading of these regulations, how would you define this principle? How would you argue for and against the justice of this principle?

The Doing of Justice

What nuances appear in regulations 6 and 8? Can you think of further nuances to add to these regulations? Compare the sanctions in nos. 8 and 22. How would you account for the differing levels of severity? What justice is

implied in no. 22 for the person who was robbed? Why do you think the city bears the responsibility in nos. 23-24? What type of legal role is implied by the king's action at the end of no. 129?

What overall sense of justice do you gain from this regulation? What behavioral clues are incorporated into regulations 250-251? Do you think "enough" justice has been incorporated into these regulations?

What nuances appear in regulations 6 and 8? Can you think of further nuances to add to these regulations? What type of legal role is implied by the king's action at the end of no. 129? What overall sense of justice do you gain from this regulation? What behavioral clues are incorporated into regulations 250-251? Do you think "enough" justice has been incorporated into these regulations?



Gilgamesh Epic
Tablet 11: The Flood Narrative



Gilgamesh
(cylinder seal impression)



Assyrian Cavalry
(bas relief)
7th century BCE

Assyrian
8th
BC
Pergamon
Berlin
Hanson



Officers
century
bas relief
Museum,
©K. C.
1997

**Assyrian
#1:
bas relief
BCE
Museum,
©K. C. Hanson**



**Soldiers
Spearmen
8th century
Pergamon
Berlin
1997**



Shamshi-Adad V
Assyrian Emperor
(reigned 823—811 BCE)
limestone stele
Pergamon Museum, Berlin
©K. C. Hanson 1997



Esarhaddon
Assyrian Emperor
(ruled 681–669 BCE)
stele
Pergamon Museum, Berlin
©K. C. Hanson



Esarhaddon
Assyrian Emperor
(ruled 681–669 BCE)
with Tirhaka (Ethiopian King of Egypt)
and Ba'alu (King of Tyre)
dolerite stele
(#VA 2708)
3.22 meters high
Pergamon Museum, Berlin
©K. C. Hanson 1997



Ashurbanipal and the Sacred Tree

Assyrian Emperor
(ruled 668—627 BCE)
bas relief
British Museum



Winged Spirit

Pollenating a Date Palm

Assyrian

883-859 BCE

reign of Ashurnasirpal II

alabaster

248.8cm x 154.9cm

inv. #1943.246



Ishtar Gate
from Babylon
(Pergamon Museum, Berlin)
©K. C. Hanson 1997

*Dedicatory Inscription
on the
Ishtar Gate, Babylon*

DESCRIPTION	
<i>Language:</i>	Akkadian
<i>Medium:</i>	glazed brick
<i>Size:</i>	c. 15 meters high c. 10 meters wide
<i>Length:</i>	60 lines of writing
<i>Genre:</i>	Dedication Inscription
<i>Dedicator:</i>	Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylonia (reigned 605—562 BCE)
<i>Approximate Date:</i>	600 BCE
<i>Place of Discovery:</i>	Babylon (near modern Baghdad, Iraq)
<i>Date of Excavation:</i>	1899—1914
<i>Current Location:</i>	Pergamon Museen



TRANSLATION

(Adapted from [Marzahn](#) 1995:29-30)

Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, the faithful prince appointed by the will of Marduk, the highest of princely princes, beloved of Nabu, of prudent counsel, who has learned to embrace wisdom, who fathomed their divine being and reveres their majesty, the untiring governor, who always takes to heart the care of the cult of Esagila and Ezida and is constantly concerned with the well-being of Babylon and Borsippa, the wise, the humble, the caretaker of Esagila and Ezida, the firstborn son of Nabopolassar, the King of Babylon.

Both gate entrances of Imgur-Ellil and Nemetti-Ellil — following the filling of the street from Babylon—had become increasingly lower. Therefore, I pulled down these gates and laid their foundations at the water-table with asphalt and bricks and had them made of bricks with blue stone on which wonderful bulls and dragons were depicted. I covered their roofs by laying majestic cedars length-wise over them. I hung doors

of cedar adorned with bronze at all the gate openings. I placed wild bulls and ferocious dragons in the gateways and thus adorned them with luxurious splendor so that people might gaze on them in wonder

I let the temple of Esiskursiskur (the highest festival house of Markduk, the Lord of the Gods—a place of joy and celebration for the major and minor gods) be built firm like a mountain in the precinct of Babylon of asphalt and fired bricks.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Noting Nebuchadnezzar's powerful position and honor, why does he consider himself "humble"? What did humility mean in an ancient Middle Eastern context? (See [Malina 1998](#))

2. What is the connection of mountain imagery with regard to ancient temples? (see [Hanson 1994](#))

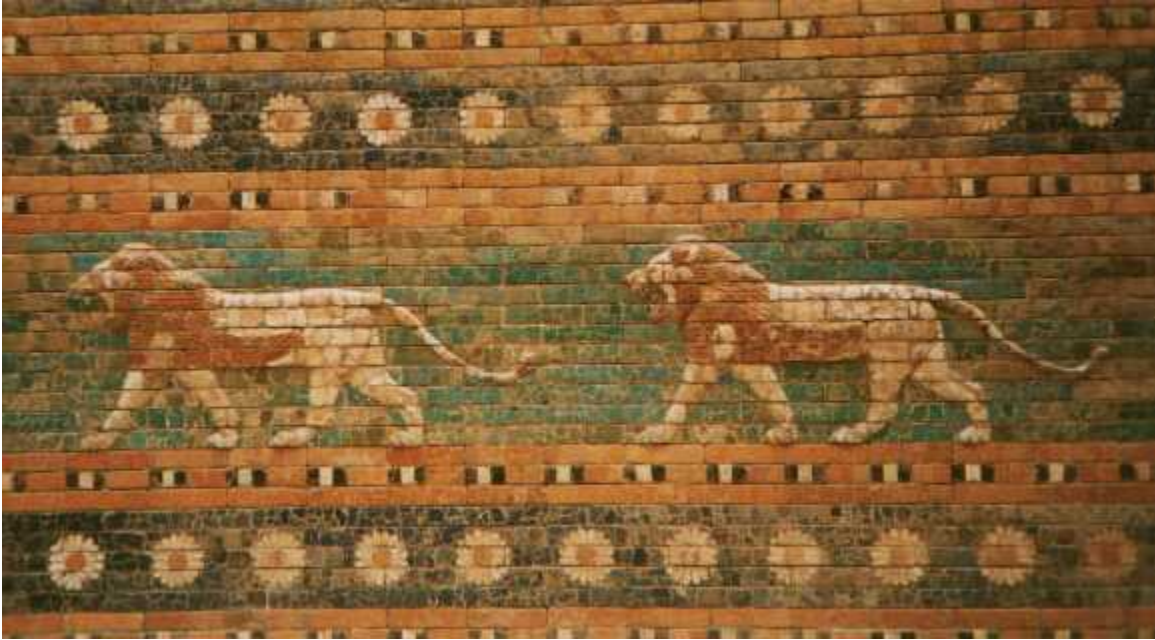
3. What functions might the bulls, lions, and dragons serve beyond decoration?

4. How does Nebuchadnezzar understand his relationship to the gods of Babylon? What does this have to do with the ideology of kingship in ancient Mesopotamia?

5. Compare and contrast this inscription to the one Akish had inscribed in honor of [Ptgyh](#) (or Ptnyh) in Ekron.



**Lion Figure
on the Ishtar Gate
from Babylon**
(Pergamon Museum, Berlin)
©K. C. Hanson 1997



**Lion Figures
on the Ishtar Gate
from Babylon**
(Pergamon Museum, Berlin)
©K. C. Hanson 1997



Guardsman of Xerxes I
bas relief
Persepolis, Iran
486-465 BCE
gray limestone

inv. #43.279
Cleveland Museum of Art
©Alice Ritari 2002



**Model of the Ishtar Gate
and Processional Way
from Babylon
(Pergamon Museum, Berlin)**
©K. C. Hanson 1997

*Photo Gallery
of
Syria & Palestine*



Ugaritic clay tablet

From [Sapanu](#)

**Banco de Datos Filológicos Semíticos Noroccidentales
(CSIC-Instituto de Filología, Madrid)**



Ba'al
Ugaritic God
of Storms & War
(14th century BCE)
Louvre Museum, Paris



Ba'al
Ugaritic God
of Storms & War
14th century BCE



**Aramean Queen(?)
and servant
funerary stele
8th century BCE
(Berlin VA 2995)
Pergamon Museum, Berlin
©K. C. Hanson 1997**



Canaanite Lions

DESCRIPTION

<i>Medium:</i>	basalt stele
<i>Size:</i>	.92 meters high .72 meters wide .23 meters thick
<i>Approximate Date:</i>	14th century BC

<i>Place of Discovery:</i>	Beth-Shean/Sythopolis (Tel el-Husn)
<i>Date of Discovery:</i>	1928
<i>Current Location:</i>	Israel Museum (Jerusalem)
<i>Inventory number:</i>	I. 3861

Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and he came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion roared against him; and the spirit of Yahweh came upon him powerfully, and he tore the lion apart as one tears a goat-kid. And he had nothing in his hand. (Judges 14:5-6)

**Saul and Jonathan, how beloved and handsome!
In life and in death they were not divided.
They were swifter than eagles.
They were stronger than lions. (2 Samuel 1:23)**

1QpHab: The Habakkuk Peshar

(The Commentary on Habakkuk from Qumran, Cave 1)



Model of Herod's Temple

Holyland Hotel, Jerusalem

©K. C. Hanson 1987

