

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS: HAMMURABI'S CODE

Answer the following questions about Hammurabi's Code. **Sample answers**

1. In the prologue, 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." Do you think the laws support his claim to protect people from being harmed? Give specific examples.

Several laws show compassion for the weak. Law 23 shows compassion for victims of robbery by requiring repayment even if the robber is not caught. Law 55 shows compassion for victims of unintended flooding. That said, his compassion is applied unevenly. The punishment for harming a common freed man or slave is less than for harming an equal.

2. Law 2 refers to jumping in the river as a method of demonstrating guilt or innocence. If the accused survived, they were innocent; if they drowned, they were guilty. What does this practice communicate about the Babylonian belief that the gods played a significant role in their lives?

This practice follows the Babylonian belief that the gods played a role in determining justice. The assumption is that the gods will determine guilt by allowing injury to occur and that people (even kings) do not have the wisdom of the gods.

3. List four crimes that are punishable by death.

1. Falsely accusing someone of a crime (Laws 2 and 3)
2. Stealing from a temple or the court (Law 6)
3. Receiving stolen goods (Law 6)
4. Getting caught committing a robbery (Law 22)

4. Do you consider any of the laws to be particularly unfair, too harsh, or unwise?

Answers may vary.

5. What do Hammurabi's punishments for different classes of people (slaves, commoners, an equal, or an animal) say about the social system in ancient Babylonia?

Consider punishments in laws 198-200: "If a man has destroyed the eye of a man of the same class, they shall destroy his eye...If he has destroyed the eye of a commoner...he shall pay one mina of silver. If he has destroyed the eye of a slave...he shall pay half the slave's price." These quotations give evidence that the Babylonians did not live under a social system that treated all people equally.

6. Why was it significant that Hammurabi's laws were written in stone and publicly displayed? Cite two reasons this would be important.

Writing the laws in stone made them more permanent. People would not expect the punishments to change. Publicly displaying the laws for everyone to see underscored that knowing the punishments would be a deterrent to breaking a law.

7. Is Hammurabi a wise leader? Do you consider him to be a good "father to his subjects" as he calls himself in the epilogue? Cite two specific details from the text that support your assessment of Hammurabi.

Answers may vary.
