

RESOURCES – ARCHAEOLOGICAL WINDOWS ON THE BIBLE

Stele of Hammurabi

Date: 1792-1750BC

Material: Diorite

Dimensions: 2.25m x 0.65m x 0.65m

Discovery: The stele was found at Susa, the Elamite capital, by French archaeologist Jean-Jacques de Morgan (1857-1924). De Morgan conducted excavations at Susa from 1897 and in the winter of 1901 the Stele of Hammurabi was found on the acropolis. It is probable that the stele was taken to Susa from Babylon in 12 century BC when Shutruk-Nakhkhunte, king of Elam, raided Babylon and carried off a number of monuments including the stele. It is now in the Louvre

Description: The stele is carved from diorite and stands 2.25m high. It commemorates Hammurabi, King of Babylon 1792 BC to 1750 BC, and contains 282 laws written in cuneiform script and the Akkadian Language. The text is written vertically. The top of the stele has a relief depicting Hammurabi with his hands over his mouth as a sign of prayer standing before the seated sun-god Shamash. Hammurabi is receiving the symbols of royal authority from Shamash.

Discussion: Hammurabi was the sixth Amorite king of Babylon reigning between 1792 BC and 1750 BC (middle chronology). At the time of his death his empire controlled all of Mesopotamia.

When the stele was found some scholars claimed that the laws were the origin of the Ten Commandments, but it soon became clear that such a connection was tenuous. However Hammurabi's laws did demonstrate that there were sophisticated legal frameworks in the Ancient Near East well before the time of the biblical narrative of Moses. Laws similar to those of Hammurabi have been found at earlier Sumerian sites.

The vertical layout of the text on the stele seems to indicate that it was not meant for human examination. The laws themselves are not legally consistent and do not appear to be intended as a code. The scene at the top of the stele asserts that Hammurabi's kingly authority was of divine origin, and it is therefore probable that the legal determinations recorded on the stele were an attempt by Hammurabi to demonstrate to the gods that his judgements were just and that therefore his appointment as king was legitimate. In erecting the stele he may also have sought continued divine favour and prosperity. The Old Testament seems to be expressing a similar sentiment when it records some of Solomon's judgements to demonstrate his royal wisdom (1Kings 3:16-28; 4: 32-4).

The sophistication of the judgements is displayed by the first law which may be paraphrased as, 'If a man falsely accuses someone of murder he shall be put to death'. It was a given that murderers should be put to death, but this is saying that false accusers are in fact murderers because they seek to get the accused executed by the legal authority. Hammurabi understood that it is human nature for people to accuse others of crimes they themselves are guilty of.

The laws range broadly dealing with personal relationships, property, trade and economics. Interest rates for example were limited to 20%, which is in contrast to much Middle Eastern commerce before and after the Old Babylonian period where rates were often much higher than this. Such injustice led Mohammed to ban usury, the lending of money for interest.

Links:

[The Stele of Hammurabi \(Louvre museum\)](#)

[Works by Hammurabi at Project Gutenberg](#)

References:

Morgan Jacques de, Jéquier Gustave, 1905 Premier royaume susien, in *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse*, vol. VII, Recherches archéologiques, 2e série, Paris, pp. 28-29, pl. 5.

Roth Martha, 1995 *Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, Atlanta: Scholars Press.

M.E.J. Richardson 2005 *Hammurabi's Laws: Text, Translation and Glossary*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.



