



A New Set of Laws

From the mountains of present-day Turkey, two rivers flow through Syria and Iraq to the Persian Gulf. The land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers is part of an area called the Fertile Crescent. Although the region has a desert climate, the area between the rivers is fertile farmland. In Greek, the region was called Mesopotamia, or "land between the rivers."

Settlers, known as the Sumerians, came to Mesopotamia to farm. By 3000 B.C., the Sumerians had built several city-states in Mesopotamia. A city-state is a city and the farmland that surrounds it. Each one was like its own country, and the city-states were often at war with each other. Because they fought each other, the city-states were too weak to survive attacks from outsiders.

Around 2000 B.C., nomadic warriors invaded Mesopotamia. They set up their capital at Babylon and started an empire. An empire brings several peoples, nations, or independent states under the control of one ruler.

Hammurabi, who ruled from 1792 B.C. to 1750 B.C., was the Babylonian Empire's greatest ruler. He brought all the people in his empire together under one set of laws. It was one of the first sets of laws to be written down. This set of 282 laws is called Hammurabi's Code. The laws covered family issues, business conduct, and crime. Copies were carved in stone and placed all over the empire for people to read.

Hammurabi's Code followed the idea of retaliation: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. For example, one of the laws reads as follows: "If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out." Everyone had to follow the laws. However, punishments for breaking them were different for the rich and the poor, and for men and women.

By today's standards, Hammurabi's Code was very strict and punishments for breaking the law were severe. However, by giving specific penalties for specific crimes, Hammurabi's Code established social order. If a person was wronged, the state punished the offender for breaking the law. This stopped people from getting revenge by taking the law into their own hands.

Historians have learned a lot about the Babylonian Empire by studying the laws of Hammurabi's Code. For example, laws about marriage and family show that men were superior to women in Mesopotamian society. The Babylonian Empire reached its peak during Hammurabi's rule. About 200 years after he died, the Babylonian Empire fell to new invaders.



