Name _____ Date _____

Hammurabi's Code and Early Laws

Directions: Read about Hammurabi's laws, then study the table, which retells five of them in plain words. Answer each question using the passage, the table or both.

Hammurabi's Code

A King's Laws in Stone

Hammurabi ruled Babylon, a city on the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia, from about 1792 to 1750 BCE. Farmers there used river water for their fields.

Near the end of his reign, about 280 of his laws were carved on a tall black stone. They were written in cuneiform, the wedge-shaped writing of Mesopotamia. Today they are called the Code of Hammurabi.

The laws cover trade, farming, wages, family life, stealing and injuries. Most of them describe a case and then say what should happen. Some punishments were very harsh. Punishments often depended on a person's social class. The laws name three main groups: upper-class free people, commoners and enslaved people.

At the top of the stone, a carving shows Hammurabi standing before Shamash. The Babylonians worshipped Shamash as a god of justice. In the opening words on the stone, Hammurabi said the gods had chosen him to bring justice and to protect weak people from the powerful.

Hammurabi's code is not the oldest known law code. The Code of Ur-Nammu, named for a king of the city of Ur, is about 300 years older. But Hammurabi's code is the most complete set of Babylonian laws that has survived.

Centuries later, a king from Elam carried the stone to the city of Susa, in what is now Iran. French archaeologists found it there in the early 1900s. Today it is in the Louvre Museum in Paris. Carvings of Hammurabi also appear among famous lawgivers in the U.S. Capitol and the U.S. Supreme Court building.

Five laws from the Code of Hammurabi, retold in plain words

Situation	What the law says
A farmer does not keep the dike (earth wall) beside his field strong. It breaks, and water floods the fields around it.	He must repay the grain that was ruined. If he cannot, he and his goods are sold to repay the other farmers.
A builder's poorly built house falls down and kills the owner.	The builder is put to death.
A surgeon performs a serious operation and heals the patient.	The surgeon is paid 10 shekels for an upper-class patient, 5 for a commoner, and 2 for an enslaved person, paid by the owner.

Situation	What the law says
An upper-class man puts out another person's eye.	If the victim is upper-class, the attacker's own eye is put out. If the victim is a commoner, he pays a fine. If the victim is enslaved, he pays the owner half the person's price.
A man hires a worker to farm his field for a year.	The law sets how much grain the worker must be paid for the year.

1. Babylon's farmers used water from the Euphrates River. Which law in the table deals with keeping that water under control?

A. The law about a worker hired for a year

B. The law about a surgeon's pay

C. The law about a farmer whose dike breaks

D. The law about a builder whose house falls down

2. In what kind of writing were Hammurabi's laws carved?

A. The Greek alphabet

B. Hieroglyphs, the picture signs of ancient Egypt

C. Cuneiform, the wedge-shaped writing of Mesopotamia

D. Chinese characters

3. What was the Code of Hammurabi?

A. A collection of about 280 laws carved on a tall stone

B. A map of the canals along the Euphrates River

C. A set of prayers to Shamash written on papyrus

D. A list of the kings who ruled Babylon

4. Which two rows of the table show that the outcome of a case could depend on social class?

☐ A. The surgeon who heals a patient

☐ B. The builder whose house falls down

☐ C. The worker hired for a year

☐ D. The man who puts out another person's eye

☐ E. The farmer whose dike breaks

5. Look at the surgeon row. How much was a surgeon paid for healing a commoner?

A. Nothing at all B. 2 shekels C. 10 shekels D. 5 shekels

6. Based on the builder law in the table, what was that law most likely meant to do?

A. Protect builders from angry owners

B. Let builders set their own prices

C. Push builders to make houses strong and safe

D. Allow only upper-class men to build houses

7. Which sentence from the passage shows that law codes existed before Hammurabi's?

A. Most of them describe a case and then say what should happen.

B. Today it is in the Louvre Museum in Paris.

C. The Code of Ur-Nammu, named for a king of the city of Ur, is about 300 years older.

D. Near the end of his reign, about 280 of his laws were carved on a tall black stone.

8. A carving at the top of the stone shows Hammurabi standing before Shamash. What does this carving most likely suggest?

A. Shamash, not Hammurabi, was the king of Babylon.

B. The laws were meant only for priests.

C. Hammurabi wanted people to connect his laws with the god of justice.

D. The stone was carved to mark a tomb.

9. Complete the sentences about the journey of Hammurabi's stone.

Word bank
Ur • Babylon • Susa • Paris

Centuries after Hammurabi, a king from Elam carried the stone to _____. Today the stone is kept in a museum in _____.

10. Why do carvings of Hammurabi appear in the U.S. Capitol and the U.S. Supreme Court building?

A. He wrote the oldest known law code.

B. He is honored as one of history's famous lawgivers.

C. U.S. courts still follow his laws today.

D. His stone is kept in Washington, D.C.