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HIST 100-08

Religion and Government are two of the critical factors that are required to compose a civilization. These aspects correlate with one another due to their similarities; they both strive to obtain order, power, and morality. The inaugural law code was established in the early eighteenth century B.C.E. by King Hammurabi of Babylon. The kings of early Mesopotamian life were thought to be divine, thus allowing Hammurabi to develop a law code bestowed upon him by the pagan gods Anum and Enlil. The law code was brutal, but also exemplifying of the morals that were upheld at the time. Fast forward a few centuries to the origins of Judaism and a similar story is told. The Book Of Exodus is a part of the Hebrew Torah, which will later become the first five books of the Christian bible. Exodus details the journey of Moses and the Hebrew people. Similarly to Hammurabi, Moses was considered to have power bestowed on him by an omnipotent deity referred to as Yahweh. Yahweh demanded that Moses deliver ten commandments to the Hebrew people. The commandments compare significantly to the morals shown through The Code of Hammurabi. Although these epic moments in ancient Western civilization are strikingly similar, they also contrast due to their concepts of theology, punishment, and social hierarchy.

In early Mesopotamian society, many gods were accredited to the creation of their religion. This practice is known as polytheism. Moses and his people, on the other hand, were expected to worship the sole God Yahweh, as he stated that he was a “jealous God.” Contrastingly, this practice is referred to as Monotheism. The Book of Exodus and the tellings of Moses were the primal beginnings to the concept of Monotheism. Although there are multiple gods responsible for The Code of Hammurabi, Hammurabi and Moses retrieved the law codes in similar fashions. They both were beckoned from their gods/God in order to bestow a law code on their people. Moses receives the order of the Ten Commandments after he leads the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Yahweh expected his people to follow them as gratitude for their escape. According to inscriptions on the stone of Hammurabi’s legal code, the gods Anum and Enlil desired to “promote the welfare of the people.” Despite one being polytheistic and the other monotheistic, both of the divine laws wished to instill moral justice amongst their people.

Though the morals were similar, the commandments such as “thou shalt not kill,” differed in punishment. In The Code of Hammurabi, the consequences of laws that mimic the Ten Commandments result in death--a gruesome one. For instance, for cases of adultery the women would be “thrown into the water,” or in other words, drowned. In regards to the Ten Commandments, the punishment is eternal death or banishment from the “promised land.” The reward of practicing these commandments was known as Yahweh’s covenant. As he spoke to the Hebrew people through Moses, he claimed that if they are holy and abide by his word they will be known as “The kingdom of priests.” This claim was otherwise known as Yahweh’s covenant to the Hebrew people. The Code of Hammurabi, however, only promised death for their punishments, and there was no speak of eternal death in the afterlife, at least in the legal code itself.

Additionally, the punishments listed in King Hammurabi’s legal code display a strong influence from the social hierarchy in Babylon. For example, the system states that if a “seignior has struck the cheek of a seignior who is superior to him, he shall be beaten sixty times with an oxtail whip(...)” but, “if he has broken another seignior’s bone, they shall break his bone.” Therefore, alluding to the fact that the various classes are taken into consideration when a punishment is decided. In contrast, the punishment of eternal death holds no prejudice. All sinners who disobey the commandments will be punished in the same way. Ultimately, the only superior in the Ten Commandments is God himself. This is demonstrated by the phrase “All shook with fear at the peals of thunder and lightning(...)” The use of the word “all” implies that all people are inferior to God, and that sin results in the same punishment for everyone.

Moreover, both of these sources are highly relevant to the foundation of Western civilization. In similar ways, they establish a sense of order that will prevail long after ancient times. King Hammurabi’s legal code contains the essence of Mesopotamian life. By being the first written law code, it establishes a model for legal and religious documents to follow. The Ten Commandments in The Book of Exodus being one of the most closely related examples. Despite the differences in social hierarchy, punishments, polytheism, and monotheism, the correlating sources contribute indefinitely towards the foundation of Western civilization.

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