

The Stele of Hammurabi

Author(s): Ira Maurice Price

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Exploration and Discovery.

THE STELE OF HAMMURABI.

THE old Orient is a fruitful field for the archæologist and for the student of the Bible. Surprises come thick and fast from the excavators in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Babylonia, and Persia. They are bringing to light treasures of antiquities that antedate every historical event of the Old Testament. And these "finds" are not simply specimens of ancient civilizations, but many of them touch in some vital aspect the history and literature of the ancient Hebrew race.

Their documents, too, are preserved to us in the form in which they were originally written. They have not suffered the disasters that have too often mutilated and practically destroyed documents that were written on such fallible material as papyrus. Metals, the hardest of stone, baked clay, and the natural rocks in the mountain-side have been the pages upon which they have copied their thoughts. Some of these very volumes, as we should call them, are preserved unharmed today in some of our great museums. Their words have come down to us unchanged from the days in which they were laboriously chiseled out.

The most interesting new discovery of recent years that directly affects the Bible was made by a French expedition on the site of old Susa, or of Shushan, the palace of the book of Esther, in December, 1901, and January 1902. This campaign was under the direction of M. de Morgan, who was sent out by the French government. Among the many interesting and valuable antiquities dug out of the ruins of that old city were fragments of a stele of black diorite, a fine-grained stone that readily yields to the artist's tools, and is yet so hard as to preserve its polish and carry its figures unharmed through any ordinary destruction. There were three of these fragments that were easily put together, to form a stele about eight feet high. Its form is seen in the adjoining cut. Its height is a little more than that of the famous Shalmaneser obelisk, and its surface is somewhat curved, and not four-sided as is that stele.

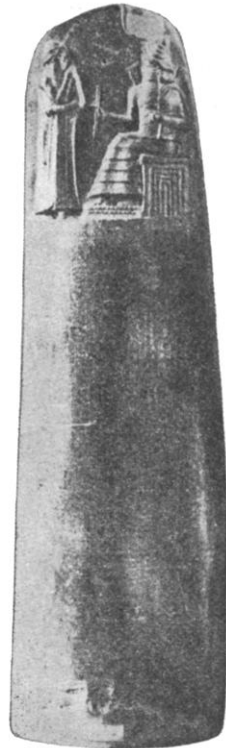
At the top of the obverse or front of the Hammurabi stele there is a bas-relief which is thought by some scholars to represent King Hammurabi receiving the laws from Shamash, the sun-god. Dr. Ward, on the other hand, sees in the standing figure, Hammurabi, a worshiper of the sitting

figure, the sun-god. Beneath these majestic figures on the front we find sixteen columns of archaic cuneiform writing, characteristic of the age of Hammurabi, whose activity as king of Babylonia dates from the middle of the twenty-third century. As seen in the adjoining cut, the wedge-writing has been executed in a wonderfully artistic style, and reveals the skill of scribes of that early day in doing clean-cut work on a hard surface. Besides the sixteen columns now intact, there were five more that have been rubbed off, probably by the captors of the stele. On the reverse or back there are twenty-eight columns of writing in a perfect state of preservation.

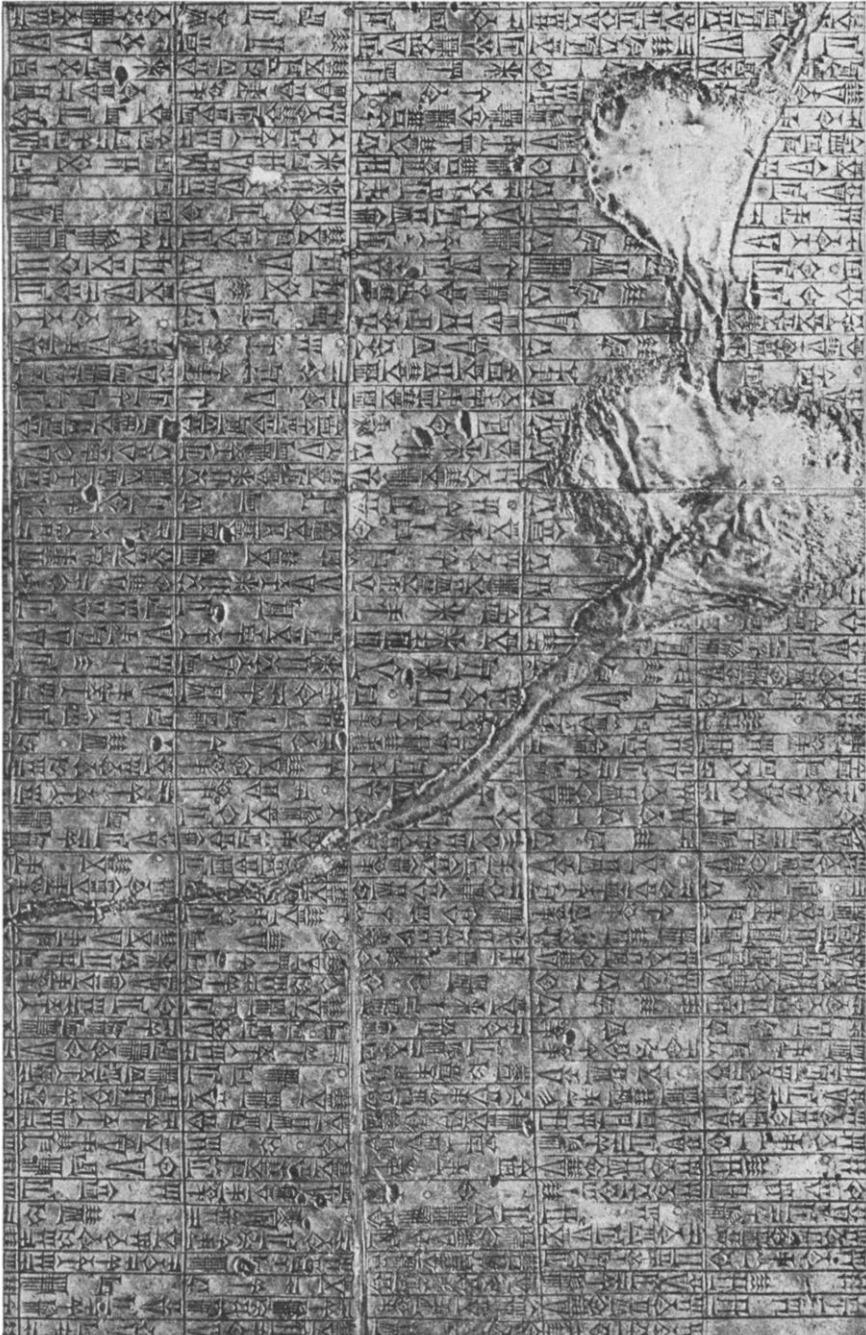
The contents of this stele are the most important facts to be noted. The first four and one-half columns of the obverse form a prologue, in laudation, among other things, of Hammurabi's appointment by the god Bel, of his completion of certain temples and cities, of his martial valor in prosecuting wars, of his piety and devotion toward a pantheon of deities, of his matchless administrative ability, of his benevolence toward all his subjects, and of his establishment of justice and law in the land.

This marvelous recital of a long catalogue of Hammurabi's virtues, abilities, and good deeds is followed by a series of laws or decisions that seem to have been codified and chiseled on this stele for popular use. Before any reader of that day should reach the first law he would be thoroughly convinced of the supreme power and almost universal activity of his master, Hammurabi. The remainder of the space on the obverse carries sixty-five laws; passing over the erased portion, the reverse, beginning with the number 100, concludes with number 282—making a total of 248 laws.

This is wholly a civil code, and deals with a people who had achieved a high state of civilization, and who were part of a complex social fabric. The laws of this code are comparable in several respects with those of Exodus, chaps. 21-23; in fact, some of the provisions are practically identical with those laws, and others vary only slightly therefrom. They deal with such



THE MONUMENT CONTAINING THE CODE OF HAMMURABI.



PHOTOGRAPHIC FACSIMILE OF A PORTION OF THE WRITING ON THE MONUMENT.
From R. F. HARPER'S *Code of Hammurabi*.



SHAMASH DELIVERING THE LAWS TO HAMMURABI.

From R. F. HARPER'S *Code of Hammurabi*.

items as marriage, and all the financial complications arising therefrom; property ownership, leasing, and renting; slaves and servants; assessments for damages; a long catalogue of crimes requiring the death penalty, and others requiring restitution, punishment, or fines; regulations for business transactions; neglect of official and other duties; and specifications touching almost every side of the life of a people who were agricultural and commercial in their activities.

A prominent lawyer in Chicago said that these decisions are so comprehensive as to presuppose courts hundreds of years before the framing of these laws could have been possible. Their antiquity is the wonder of them, and it stirs up a multitude of troublesome questions, many of which should find an answer within the next decade. If such laws as these were current and well-established, and reduced to writing, in Hammurabi's day, what shall we say of the origin of the laws of Exod., chaps. 21-23? Shall not these laws bring Moses back to an exalted position as Israel's lawgiver, and at the same time give us a hint at the origin of his civil codes? What was the vital relation between general Semitic law and the laws laid down in the Pentateuch? These are scarcely the beginning of the questions that may be asked.

Again, from a legal point of view, there is much of fundamental value in the code of Hammurabi. The legal fraternity will find that Roman law has its roots in Babylonia, Egypt, and Persia, and that the ancient world was so admirably organized as to furnish better protection, in some respects, to its subjects than does our boasted civilization of this day.

The epilogue, too, is a remarkable document, which covers the last five columns on the reverse of the stele. It describes the benefits accruing to the subjects of Hammurabi from observance of these righteous laws, and calls down the wrath of the gods upon the transgressor.

Someone may inquire how this stele came to Susa. It is thought that the Elamites in some one of their warlike campaigns into Babylonia carried it off as a trophy of victory and set it up in their capital city, Susa. And here, when the city was finally overthrown, it was broken in the general destruction of the city—not to be found until December, 1901, by the enterprise of the French government.

IRA MAURICE PRICE.