**Mosaic Law**

**Directions:** Read the following article on Mosaic Law. When you are done, answer the questions which follow in one or more complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper. Please remember to restate the question in your answer.

In about 1250 BCE, Moses freed the Hebrews from slavery and led them out of Egypt, taking them into the desert wastes of the Sinai Peninsula in a journey known as the Exodus. During this time, he revealed to them a set of laws known to historians as Mosaic Law. This code would influence the legal systems of much of the world, a legacy which continues into our modern world.

Mosaic Law governed every aspect of the lives of this ancient people. It told the Hebrews how they should worship God and how they should interact with one another, it also covered matters of hygiene and the foods they could and could not eat. Around its commandments, the Hebrews created their civilization. Mosaic Law defined who the Hebrews were as a people, setting them apart from their polytheistic neighbors as a distinct and unique culture in the ancient Middle East. As a result, in spite of foreign invasions and diaspora, the Hebrews remained a people set apart from the rest of the world.

The Hebrews preserved Mosaic Law in a text called the Five Books of Moses or the Torah, which includes the first five books of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible. Among them are the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These are called the Five Books of Moses because many Jews, Christians and Muslims believe Moses wrote these books himself. Some historians question this belief, however, choosing instead to believe that a number of different authors wrote these books over many centuries.

In some ways, Mosaic Law is similar to other legal codes which developed in the Fertile Crescent in ancient times. Mosaic Law calls for a system of “equal retribution” as the foundation for its criminal code, calling for “an eye-for-an-eye” justice. Under Mosaic Law, if a person hurt another, he was hurt in exactly the same manner. If he put out someone’s eye in a fight, for example, his eye was put out, too. It did not matter what station in life the perpetrator or victim came from.

This concept of equal retribution appears in the Code of Hammurabi as well. Like Moses, Hammurabi, a Babylonian king, revealed a set of laws for his people c. 1790 BCE. In them, he wrote, “If a man puts out the eye of another man of equal rank, his eye shall be put out.” The Code of Hammurabi and Mosaic Law were very similar on this point, but they were very different when it came how the law was applied across the different levels of society.

In the Code of Hammurabi, equal retribution was only applied if both men were of equal social rank. In Babylon of his day, there were three social ranks. These included the avilu, free persons of the upper class; the mushkenu, free persons of the lower class; and the wardu, or slaves. If a man of the upper class put out the eye of a man of the lower class, he did not lose his eye; instead, he only compensated the victim with a few silver shekels. If he put out the eye of a slave, he paid a sum of silver to the master to reimburse him for the loss of a healthy worker.

Mosaic Law differed on this point—it did not favor any class over another. Instead, it demanded equal justice for the poor and even slaves. Whereas under Babylonian law slaves could be maimed for disobeying their masters, under Mosaic Law slaves who were permanently injured by their owners were set free. Slave owners were put to death if they murdered their servants. Mosaic Law even demanded fair treatment for foreigners who lived among the Hebrews, reminding them that they were outsiders in Egypt once, too.
Much of what we believe about the law and its function and roles in society comes from Mosaic Law. Many of the people who came to America in the 17th and 18th centuries AD (such as the Puritans and Quakers) were close students of the Bible, following its tenants to the letter. They often wrote laws whose punishments mirrored those of the Bible. In Massachusetts during the 1600s, for example, the Puritan-dominated state legislature there wrote and passed a law which called for the execution of anyone who struck his or her mother or father, a law which can be found in the Bible. But they wrote the ideas of equality and fair treatment into our legal system as well, carrying on an enduring legacy of the ancient Hebrews into our modern day and age.

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level 9.7

1. **What leader revealed the Law to the Hebrews?**
2. **What is the Torah?**
3. **Explain what the concept of “equal retribution” is.**
4. **In what books of the Bible is Mosaic Law contained?**
5. **Explain how Mosaic Law was similar to the Code of Hammurabi.**
6. **Explain how Mosaic Law was different from the code of Hammurabi.**