In about 1250 BC, Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, taking them into the deserts of the Sinai Peninsula. There, he revealed to them a set of laws known to scholars as Mosaic Law. This set of laws would have a profound impact on the world.

Mosaic Law governed every aspect of their lives. It told the Hebrews how they should worship God and how they should treat one another, it also covered matters of hygiene and the foods they could and could not eat. Mosaic Law defined who the Hebrews were as a people, setting them apart from their polytheistic neighbors as a unique culture in the ancient Middle East.

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 scholars question this belief, however. They 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. Mosaic Law calls for a system of “equal retribution” as the basis for its criminal code. That is, it calls for “an eye-for-an-eye” justice. Under Mosaic Law, if a person hurt another, he was hurt in exactly the same way. If he put out someone’s eye in a fight, for example, his eye was put out, too. The law was applied equally, regardless of a person’s standing in society.

This concept of equal retribution appears in the Code of Hammurabi as well. This Babylonian king wrote a set of laws for his people c. 1790 BCE. In them, he wrote, “If a man puts out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.” The Code of Hammurabi and Mosaic Law were 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 awitu, 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 paid the victim some money. If he put out the eye of a slave, he paid a sum of silver to repay the master for his 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. Slaves who were permanently injured by their owners were set free, and slave owners were put to death if they killed their slaves. 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 what it should do 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. They often wrote laws whose punishments mirrored those of the Bible. But they wrote the ideas of equality and fair treatment into our legal system as well. This is an enduring legacy of the ancient Hebrews in our modern day and age.

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level 7.8
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.