Study Questions: Middle Assyrian Laws

The Middle Assyrian Laws are a collection of laws composed in the cuneiform (wedgeshaped) writing system of ancient Mesopotamia (roughly modern-day Iraq). The documents were written in Akkadian (one of the earliest Semitic languages) in the Middle Assyrian dialect. The existing copies were apparently edited during the reign of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser I (ca. 1115–1077 BCE). The corpus was perhaps collected either for his royal library or for individual scribal libraries. The texts were found during excavations at the site of Qal’at Shergat (ancient Assur) in northern Iraq in the early twentieth century. They appear to be copies of originals that were likely composed at least three centuries earlier. The existing copies number about fifteen tablets, one of which is duplicated by a copy that dates to the Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 900–612 BCE). The relationship of the documents to each other, however, is not clear. Thus it is not certain whether we are dealing with a “code” of laws or a series of thematic texts with legal pronouncements that include provisions concerning women, blasphemy, assault, sexual offenses, homicide, inheritance, veiling, witchcraft, abortion, agriculture, irrigation, pledges, deposits, theft, maritime traffic, and false accusations. Moreover, the order and the nature of the laws defy easy categorization.

1. List the ways in which the Middle Assyrian Laws reflect social class and the arrangement of the social order during the period in which they were written.

2. The laws make repeated references to slaves. How would slavery have been defined during this period? How did the Assyrian concept of slavery differ from the more modern understanding of slavery, such as that practiced in colonial and post-independence America?

3. The laws are rather explicit with regard to sexual behavior and are quite specific about extramarital sexual relations in various contexts, including such matters as sodomy, rape, and prostitution. Further, the laws are quite specific about charges and allegations of sexual misbehavior that might be made by a third party. Why did law writers place so much emphasis on these matters? Why would such matters have been important at this time and in this place?

4. Similarly, the laws go into considerable detail about the status of women under various circumstances, such as when a woman’s husband appears to have abandoned her or what her rights were if she were left widowed. Why would such matters have been important to the Assyrians at this time?

5. Scholars study texts such as the Middle Assyrian Laws and law codes from other ancient cultures to trace the history of the development of more modern legal codes—that is, to find the ancient roots of modern legal traditions. Specify ways in which the Middle Assyrian Laws prefigure more modern law codes. For example, do you see any connection between the laws regarding evidence and hearsay (evidence based not on a witness’s personal knowledge but on someone else’s statement) and modern rules of courtroom evidence?