ADMINISTRATIVE LAW

See Legal Experts; Legal Institutions; and Monarchy and Administration.

ADOPTION

Adoption can be defined as the establishment of a kinship relationship, usually as parent and child, between two individuals who are not related by blood. It was extant as a legal institution in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean world. In most cases, the adoptee acquired the rights of a natural born child, especially to an inheritance, but in some cases, the adoptee obtained lesser rights than natural born children. Generally, adoptions created the bond of parent and child, but other kin relationships were also formed. Abandoned youngsters were adopted, but often the adoptees were relatives or slaves of the adopter before the act of adoption took place. Adoption is to be distinguished from guardianship, a relationship in which a minor receives protection and support from an adult but is not considered the son or daughter of the adopter.

Ancient Near East. A great deal of documentation for adoption has been found in extrabiblical sources from the ancient Near East in contrast to the paucity and elusiveness of the references to adoption in the Bible. The extrabiblical evidence has been used to illuminate possible cases of adoption in the Bible.

Documentation for adoption dates from the Neo-Sumerian period or Ur III period (late twenty-second to twenty-first centuries B.C.E.) to the Achaemenid period (a text dated to 416 B.C.E.). Law collections (sometimes denoted as law codes) contain statutes dealing with adoption, but they are vastly exceeded by the number of adoption contracts that have been excavated. It is unknown what relationship law collections had to legal practice—whether they reflected as it was actually implemented or served to legislate new law; were just scribal exercises and assignments; or were some combination thereof—but they are far from systematic in their presentation of adoption law. At the same time, contracts seemingly more connected to actual legal practice omit details from which legal historians would be able to illuminate the socioeconomic circumstances in which adoptions took place. In any case, since all of this documentation originates from a variety of cultures in a wide chronological and geographical distribution, general conclusions must necessarily be provisional.

In the ancient Near East, adoption was used as a means to care for abandoned or unwanted children:
it was intended to ensure the physical and social survival of minor children as well as to provide emotional fulfillment to the adoptive parent. Adding to the household labor force may have been a factor as well. It is probably not possible to determine the extent of the abandonment of children or infanticide in the ancient Near East; nevertheless, poor health, war, famine, drought, and social and economic difficulties may have contributed to children being bereft of parents and to adults being childless.

While humanitarian adoptions of minor children took place, it was common in the ancient Near East for adults to be adopted. Adult adoption was a strategy used in different social, economic, and cultural circumstances. It was also a powerful legal instrument whose great flexibility and effectiveness in creating direct ties allowed it to secure rights and duties that otherwise might have been limited or unreliable (Westbrook, *HANEL*, pp. 50–54). It validated property, matrimonial, and commercial transactions beyond the limitations of other legal mechanisms. Since inheritance by a testament or will did not exist, adoption was used to transfer property after death. It safeguarded mutual economic and social obligations that general contracts could not.

Adoption created a real proximate relationship for the purpose of mutual support and inheritance. (It is not as clear that adoptions were undertaken for the sake of social position, as they were in Rome, e.g.; see Lindsay, 2009; Stone and Owen, 1991.) Reciprocal obligations came into effect. The adopter took on the position of heir and provided physical and emotional support. The adopter used adoption to maintain a line of succession for property and to secure burial and mortuary rites. Presumably social pressure to fulfill postmortem rituals reinforced legal obligations. Familial ties could be threatened by adoption because adoption introduced outsiders to a kinship network, but adopting an individual with the obligation of care of the adopter(s) in old age might be advantageous and convenient, even if the adopter had natural children.

*Adoption in cuneiform law collections and scribal exercises.* The statutes in the Laws of Hammurapi (LH), a Babylonian ruler who reigned from 1792 to 1750 B.C.E., address the adoption of minors. In the case of an orphan whose parent(s) and other relatives have abandoned it at birth (literally, "in his amniotic fluid"), the act of abandonment has the consequence that the natural family may never reclaim the child (LH §185). In contrast, if the child was found searching for his or her family, then the child was deemed lost and can be reclaimed by the natural family (LH §186). While a foundling was protected from a family that abandoned him, the Laws of Hammurapi address the danger the foundling may face: an adopter of a foundling created the relationship by a unilateral act and could dissolve the relationship by a unilateral act (Westbrook, 1993). While not preventing the ability of the adopter to dissolve the relationship, the Laws of Hammurapi ameliorate the predicament of the former adoptee by requiring compensation (LH §191): a child adopted from known relatives would presumably have an adoption contract containing provisions protecting the adoptee from disinheritance. Other statutes also protect a foundling without an adoption contract: a craftsman must teach a foundling his craft, otherwise the foundling may return to his family (LH §§188–189). If the foundling was taken in adoption but the adopter does not consider the adoptee equal with his children, the foundling may return to his natural family (LH §190). The Laws of Hammurapi also provide for the severe punishment of persons adopted by certain ranks of palace and temple personnel (LH §§187, 191–192). In addition, the Laws of Hammurapi deal with the case of children of a slave woman who are adopted by their father: they are to be considered equal to the children of the first ranking wife (LH §170). However, if they are not adopted by their father, they are to be manumitted (LH §171).

The Middle Assyrian Laws (MAL), a law collection from the fourteenth century B.C.E., contains a provision about a widow who marries another man while pregnant with a son from her prior marriage: if the son is not adopted by the new husband by a formal adoption contract, he does not inherit from his mother’s husband; nor is he responsible for his debts. Rather, he inherits from his father’s estate (MAL A §28).
The Hittite Laws (a law collection from Anatolia ca. 1650 B.C.E.; HL) mentions only one case of adoption, one in which a free man adopted by a semi-free man (such as those working on a large estate, whether craftsman or agricultural worker of any status, including foreman or shepherd) loses his free status (HL §36).

The series *ana itāšu*, a scribal exercise from the first millennium B.C.E. that contains material from the Old Babylonian period, refers to a child who either “does not have parents” or “does not know his father or mother” (Landsberger, 1937, pp. 44–46). The adopter saves the child from a variety of hazards and pays for his upbringing, but if the natural parents appear, they can claim him back after paying the adopter for expenses.

**A sampling of cuneiform adoption contracts.** Adoption contracts protected adopter and adoptee. Adoption could be canceled by either party, and while a contract could not revoke the right to dissolve the adoption, the penalty provisions made exercising that right costly, acting as a deterrent.

The adoption of children. The adoption of children had advantages for adopter and adoptee. A childless adopter could gain a child for emotional satisfaction and to preserve the family line.

The unwanted were adopted. Adopted youngsters could be designated as children thrown "into the street," even though they had living relatives who might have assumed responsibility for them. In one case, for instance, their grandfather abandoned all claim to some children, and their uncle refused to pay the claim of a thousand shekels against them (Emar 256). In another case, a woman places her infant son at a dog's mouth presumably so that another may take him from there, and it is possible that this placement was a symbolic act to effect the status of foundling (Neo-Babylonian period: Nbk 439).

Many adoptions were of relatives, such as a nephew (Neo-Babylonian period: AnOr 8 14; CTMMA 3 53: ROMCT 2 37), brother (Neo-Babylonian period: CTMMA 3 102), or grandson (Neo-Babylonian period: BRL 1 10). A woman could protect her position as a wife by adopting her husband's children. A Neo-Assyrian woman's marriage contract provides that if she were barren, she may take a maidservant as her substitute and she would adopt the maidservant's children as her own (Grayson and Van Seters, 1975). The woman retained full control over the maidservant, however, to do with her as she wished.

Adoptions were used to provide for the adopter's old age: even when a couple had a son who could otherwise support them, adopting an adult whose responsibility it would be to support the elderly was apparently more convenient and effective (Stol and Vleeming, 1998). The adoption of an adult by another adult meant that the adoptee gained an inheritance share, sometimes even acquiring it immediately upon issuance of the adoption contract, and that the adopter obligated someone to support him in his old age. In these cases, the adoptee was a party to the adoption contract (Old Babylonian period: BIN 2 752 = Charpin, 1927, pp. 162–164; TJA 28:1 = Charpin, 1927, pp. 5–7; YOS 8 120:2). A man might adopt a father and son together (Neo-Babylonian period: VAS 6 168 = NRV 10; OLZ 7 [1904] 39). In another case, a brother and sister were both adopted. The brother obtained the inheritance, and the sister was to support the adopters (Neo-Babylonian period: YOS 17 1). A slave might receive manumission and be adopted for the purpose of supporting his former master in his old age (Old Babylonian period: CT 4 42a = UAZP 23).

Men and women could adopt, and adoption by one spouse did not necessarily create a tie with another. There is a case in which a wife adopts the son of her husband (Neo-Babylonian period: VAS 5 129 = NRV 17) and another in which a man wants to adopt the son of his wife by a previous marriage but is forbidden by his father, who orders him to adopt a brother instead (Neo-Babylonian period: CTMMA 3 102). A remarriage did not make a child from a previous marriage automatically the child of the new spouse; therefore a formal adoption by the new parent was required (ca. thirteenth–twelfth centuries B.C.E.: Emar 30).

Slaves were manumitted and adopted on the condition that they continue to support their master. At their master's death, they were completely freed (Emar 6, 91; RE 26). A slave might be manumitted and adopted because the slave was the natural child of the adopter by a female slave, and adoption might
be a means of legitimation (Neo-Sumerian period: NATN 920; Neo-Babylonian period: BM 785-43). However, there are manumission texts that omit any mention of adoption but oblige the manumitted slave to stay at his master’s service, presumably to care for him in his old age (Veenhof, 1982, p. 375-542).

The penalties for an adoptee trying to repudiate the adopter could be severe. An adoptive son was to share everything with his adoptive parents: if he hides any of his income or decides to live separately, he will be killed (Old Assyrian period: EL 8). A Middle Babylonian adoption contract is notable for its unusually severe punishment: the adoptee who tries to repudiate his adoption is to have his head smeared with hot asphalt as well as pay an indemnity (Podany et al., 1991-1993). In one case from Emar, an adoption was revoked by an official when an adoptee failed to perform īlātu service (the government service required of free men) and was returned to slave status. It is unclear whether the adoptee refused the service, preferring to revert to being a slave in order to avoid performing it, or whether the change in status was punishment for being a troublemaker (Westenholz, 2000, p. 2). Not all adoption contracts contained a penalty clause (Stone and Owen, 1991).

Adoptions were often undertaken to pay off debts. A father sold his daughter to a creditor, adopted the creditor, and disinherited his own son (Neo-Sumerian period: NG 204:21-33). Another adoptee paid off the adopter’s debts and pledged to pay him a pension in return for receiving the adopter’s estate immediately (Neo-Sumerian period: NATN 131). Adoption could also be used to circumvent a creditor: a woman gave her son and daughter to her sister in adoption to forestall a claimant who had the right to enslave the children as payment for the woman’s debt (Emar: TBR 77).

An adopter might turn over all or part of his or her property to the adoptee with the proviso that the adopter retains use of it as long as he or she lives. Even if the adoptee was a creditor of the adopter (see above), the adoption created more than a fictive tie: the adoptee was required to support his new parent(s) and assume responsibility for marrying off his new siblings (Emar 6; RE 10, 13). This worked in reverse as well. A debtor might be adopted by his creditor for the purpose of gaining an adult male as part of the household labor force and support the adopter in his old age, sometimes with a promise of an inheritance and sometimes without (RE 25, 63; TBR 39, 40, 74).

Adopting a son-in-law ensured that the daughter’s children would continue her father’s line, rather than the line of the son-in-law’s father (RE 25). Among these grandchildren would be one who would assume responsibility for the ancestral cult and the posthumous needs of the adopter. The adoptive son-in-law was given an inheritance from his new family in return for relinquishing his own lineage.

Brotherhood adoptions. Adoptions into brotherhood were implemented at Ugarit (a city on the coast of Syria whose archive dates from the thirteenth century B.C.E.) for the purpose of joint ownership over property (RS 16, 344; 21.230; 25.134). Such individuals may have been held liable for their adoptive brothers’ debts, and it is clear that members of a company identified each other as “brother.” This brother relationship could be terminated by either party: if the adopter canceled the relationship, the departing individual appropriated what was presumably his share of common property as well as his contribution to the household. If the adoptee initiated the break, he took only his contribution.

Matrimonial adoptions. Matrimonial adoptions were utilized to facilitate marriage arrangements, and at times the adopter might provide the dowry to a female adoptee or grant an inheritance to a male adoptee. At times, the adoption created a parent-child relationship. A woman could adopt a girl from her parents, giving her parents the bride-price (terįkatum) that a mother-in-law would give, and could then marry her off (Old Babylonian period: CT 47, 40). One couple adopted a son and then married him off to their own daughter (Neo-Babylonian period: Nbn 356).

At other times, a woman was adopted by a man or another woman into sisterhood. This type of adoption had the purpose of transferring the responsibility for negotiating the woman’s marriage arrangements from her or her brother to the adoptive brother (Eichler, 1977; Greengus, 1975). The woman’s consent was required,
as was her brother's, if she had not been released from his authority. The adoptive brother gained the right to the woman's bride-price, either in whole or part, and to her labor, as long as she remained in his house unmarried. It is likely that either the woman or her natural brother was in severe economic straits to seek this kind of adoption since it would have been far more profitable to have negotiated the marriage themselves.

Adoption for the sake of property transfer. At certain times and places in the ancient Near East, the sale of certain types of property was restricted, and adoption was used as a way for a wealthy individual to gain property. In the Old Babylonian city of Nippur, those eager to gain property were amenable to adopting those who needed security in old age and who had property, especially prestigious property associated with temple offices (Stone and Owen, 1991).

The flexible use of adoption as a legal institution for the transfer of property is taken to an extreme degree at Nuzi where adoption was the usual device for the sale of real estate (Zaccagnini, HANEL, pp. 594-596, 599-600, 604-605). Real estate was transferred only by inheritance or by a conveyance in which the buyer was adopted and the land was transferred as a gift inter vivos. This use of adoption was completely fictitious—the intention of the parties was solely to transfer property. No continuing proximate relationship was anticipated or desired. Presumably, it was impossible to purchase land in the routine way and so adoption was used as a legal fiction to circumvent the inalienability of property. In this way, one wealthy man at Nuzi became the adoptive son of about two hundred different persons, each of whom sold their real estate to him under the legal fiction of adoption.

Adoptions for social advancement. A number of Nuzi texts (ca. thirteenth–twelfth centuries B.C.E.) regarding the adoption of a daughter indicate that the adoptive daughter's family remained in touch with her and retained claims on her, and it is surmised that in some cases the bond between the daughter and her natural family was not severed (Grosz, 1987). In these instances, the adopter became a kind of godparent, whose social standing and economic resources would lend prestige and possibly financial support, thereby enhancing the adoptive daughter's circumstances. Other texts referring to an adoption into daughterness and daughter-in-law-ship appear to be used by wealthy people in order to acquire the labor of a female dependent permanently without her thereby becoming a member of the adoptive family. The woman's future husband was to be sought among the adopter's slaves, and some contracts prohibited her from leaving her adopter's household. Her adopter had the right to her private possessions acquired during her time under the adopter's authority, either as a gift or through her own labor, and her children by the adopter's slave would not inherit anything from their parents.

An unusual adoption contract was found at Alalakh in which the declaration of adoption is made by the son, rather than the father (AT 16). This may be because the adopted son is a noble, and the adopter may wish to acquire royal patronage in return for property and possessions. More than just a fictitious adoption for the sake of selling real estate, as at Nuzi, the adoption may be a mode of gaining access to the protection offered by the royal family by offering a formal exchange that would function as a bribe.

Adoption in texts from Egypt. Only limited evidence for adoption from ancient Egypt has survived. Even so, one text demonstrates that it had similar effectiveness and utility as in cuneiform cultures. The Adoption Papyrus from the New Kingdom period relates that a husband has adopted his wife as his daughter (Fyfe, 1992; Johnson, 1996). They were childless, and in order to prevent the husband's collateral heirs (his siblings) from acquiring his property, he adopted his wife. This was done in front of witnesses, among whom was his sister, most likely indicating that (some of) his family agreed to their alienation from his property. This couple jointly purchased a slave girl, perhaps at an early stage of their marriage, who gave birth to a son and two daughters fathered by the husband. A later statement by the husband declares that his younger brother married the older daughter and that he has emancipated her and adopted his younger brother. The wife then states that she concurs with the emancipation and adoption and also frees the two other children and nominates
her husband's younger brother as the executor of her will. These adoptions, of the wife by the husband and of the brother by his sister, demonstrate the legal force of inheritance in a direct line by children from fathers. The way to insure inheritance as an individual wishes, that is, is to adopt the desired heir. At the same time, the adoptions were recognized as a legal fiction because it did not undo the marriages. In Roman law, for example, these individuals would have become unmarried in the adoption process (the only exception being if they had married cum manu—an older form of marriage that was rare by the second century B.C.E., through which the wife was subsumed under the status of the husband's child). Rather, adoption was undertaken for the consequences it effected on the devolution of property without attention paid to other aspects of adoption; adoption created a superior claim on property; moreover, the situation of a childless widow was precarious. A slave woman bought for the purpose of procreation helped to avoid a divorce caused by the inability of the wife to bear children. The wife's adoption by her husband further secured her position during her husband's lifetime, while the adoption of the slave woman's children and the husband's younger brother protects her position as matriarch of the family.

A text on the manumission and adoption of a slave is extant from the colony of Jewish mercenaries at Elephantine on the Nile River, dating to 416 B.C.E. (BMAP, no. 8). In it, a man transfers a slave to another person for adoption on the condition that the slave be emancipated.

**Ancient Israel.** References to adoption in the Hebrew Bible are elusive. Certain biblical texts have been identified as (possibly) referring to adoption, with varying degrees of success.

1. Genesis 12:10–20; 20:1–18; 26:6–11. The portrayals of the matriarchs as sisters to their husbands are not examples of matrimonial adoption since in matrimonial adoption, a man adopts a woman in order to marry her off, not to marry her himself (Greengus, 1975).
2. Genesis 15:2–3. Abraham's complaint that his slave would be his heir implies that he has adopted him (or plans to in the future) since only relatives could inherit. This appears to be analogous to the practice elsewhere in the ancient Near East of adopting a person who will provide for the adopter in his lifetime in return for an inheritance (and manumission, if the adoptee was a slave).
3. Genesis 16:1–4; 30:1–13. Sarai, Rachel, and Leah each provided a slave girl to their husbands as a concubine, with Sarai and Rachel stating their hope to have children through the concubines. The statement that Bilhah gave birth on Rachel's knees (Gen 30:3) may be a putative adoption ceremony, or it may be Rachel acting as an aid during birth, perhaps as a way of curing her own infertility (Tigay, 1972). Whatever the case, the sons of the concubines inherited their share of Jacob's estate because they were his natural sons and did not require adoption by Jacob's primary wives. However, since adoption by one parent did not necessarily mean adoption by the other (as shown elsewhere in the ancient Near East), it is possible that the concubines' children were adopted by their mothers' mistresses.
4. Genesis 29:1–31. While Laban, who did not have a son, could have adopted Jacob and given him his daughter(s), as in the widespread ancient Near Eastern practice of matrimonial adoption, Laban is portrayed instead as treating Jacob as an employee. Rachel's theft of Laban's household gods has been dismissed as proof that an adopted son inherits them (Greenberg, 1962).
5. Genesis 38:8–9; Deuteronomy 25:6; Ruth 4:5. Levirate marriage, in which a male relative of the deceased husband impregnated a widow so as to produce a firstborn son, may be viewed as a kind of posthumous adoption. The son may be called "the son of (the deceased's name)", preserving the deceased's name and most likely inheriting his property.
6. Genesis 48:5–6, 12. Jacob's declaration regarding his grandsons Ephraim and Menasseh seems to indicate that they were to inherit equally with his sons, implying that he is adopting them.
However, since these boys were his grandchil-
dren, the story seems to be primarily intended as
an etiology to explain why Joseph’s descen-
dants held two tribal territories and why Joseph
does not lend his name to an eponymous tribe.

his knees may reflect, as in Genesis 30:3 (see above),
that he participated in Machir’s birth or that
he participated in a welcoming or naming cer-
emony. Alternatively, it may just mean that Jacob
was playing with him.

8. Exodus 2:10. Pharaoh’s daughter found Moses
and, according to the text, he became her son.
While this could be interpreted that Pharaoh’s
daughter served as his guardian without adopt-
ing him, Moses continued to live as an Egyptian
as an adult, implying that he possessed Egyptian
status, a status he would gain if he had been
adopted.

9. Exodus 21:7–11. The designation of the maid-
servant for the master’s son might indicate
the common ancient Near Eastern practice of
matrimonial adoption.

10. Leviticus 18:9. The mention of a sister born out-
side of a household might refer to an adopted
sister, but it might also refer to a sister born in
a previous marriage or an illegitimate sister
(Tigay, 1972).

11. Judges 11:1–2. Jephthah was the natural son of
his father, so the issue in this passage is whether
he was legitimated and, therefore, had a right
to an inheritance.

12. Judges 17:10–11. Micah asked a young Levite to
be his father and priest. However, this state-
ment does not seem to be an adoption in which
the father takes care of the son since the Levite
lived on Micah’s homestead. Adding to the con-
fusion is that, while Micah has asked the Levite
to be his father, the text states that Micah con-
sidered the Levite “to be like one of his sons.”

13. Esther 2:7, 15. Mordecai is depicted as taking
care of his orphaned cousin; it is possible that
this is a case of adoption.

14. Ezekiel 26:1 (= 7:63); 1 Chronicles 2:35–41. There
are two instances of a son-in-law being adopted:
the descendants of Barzillai who married and
took his father-in-law’s name; and Jarha who
was a manumitted slave who then married his
former master’s daughter. Both are cases of
matrimonial adoption.

15. Ezra 10:44. A number of Israelites married foreign
women and had children, but since the text is
difficult to comprehend and may be corrupt, it
is not possible to extrapolate much informa-
tion from it.

Adoption as a metaphor

God and Israel. The metaphor of father and son is
deployed to portray the relationship between God
and the Israelite people in Exodus 4:22 and Deuter-
onomy 8:22; 32:18; 14:1. The perception that this is an
adoptive one is explicit in Jeremiah 3:19; 31:8 and
Hosea 11:1.

God and Jerusalem. Ezekiel 16 portrays God’s rela-
tionship with Jerusalem as developing from God’s
rescue of the city as a foundling. God adopts and
raises the city as his own child (Malul, 1990).

God and individual Israelites. Psalms 27:10 may re-
fect the adoption of the psalmist by God.

God and the king. 2 Samuel 7:14 (= 1 Chr 17:13; 22:10),
Psalms 2:7; 89:27–28 refer to the monarch as the ad-

Assessment. Some scholars have not been con-
cerned with the lack of clear reference to adoption,
even in biblical law, since there are other crucial legal
institutions barely mentioned in the Hebrew Bible,
and it would seem unlikely that an institution so sig-
nificant in other cultures did not also exist in ancient
Israel. Moreover, the nature of biblical texts may mili-
tate against the mention of adoption. Adoption was
of little theological interest, except as a metaphor,
and if a character is portrayed as a barren woman,
is this often resolved by a miraculous birth rather
than a humdrum adoption (Knobloch, 1992). Others
have argued that the paucity of references suggests
that adoption was rare, if practiced at all, in ancient
Israel, with some scholars positing that the institu-
tion of levirate marriage may indicate that adoption
was not considered the appropriate way to acquire
progeny (Boecker, 1974). Orphaned youngsters may
have been protected through the tribal structure of ancient Israel obviating the need for formal adoption, whereas polygyny may have ameliorated the situation of barren couples (Tigay, 1972).

Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity. Guardianship, the assumption of responsibility for a minor without the sundering of natural ties between parent and child, operated in ancient Jewish circles during the first millennium B.C.E., not adoption. An apotropos or guardian was appointed to care for all aspects of the personal welfare of a minor and to administer the child's property. If the apotropos passed away, his heirs would be responsible for the child's maintenance. However, matters of personal status, such as illegitimacy (mamzerut), priestly status, or identity as a Jew, were based on the status of the parents.

Paul used adoption as a theological metaphor to express a number of relationships with God: the election of Israel (Rom 9:4), those redeemed from spiritual enslavement (Rom 8:15; Eph 1:5; Gal 4:5), and the final redemption (Rom 8:21–23).

[See also Children; Hittite Laws; Inheritance; Laws of Hammurapi; Marriage; Middle Assyrian Laws; Nuzi Texts; Property; Scribes and Scribalism; and Slavery, subentry Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY


AMNESTY AND REFORM TEXTS

Amnesty and reform texts were edicts decreed by a king that intervened in economy and society, invalidating loans, pledges, and sales; canceling debts; and issuing behavioral instructions to government officials. They were dated to a specific time at which point their provisions would come into effect.

Mesopotamia. Amnesty and reform edicts were first issued in the third millennium B.C.E. They aimed to create social peace and curb the abuses and corruption of officials. Over time, the edicts became more focused on debt release and economic issues. Certain edicts specified that they were to apply only to citizens or to certain cities, while others were to apply to the population more broadly.

Early dynastic period. Enmetana, ruler of Lagash (early twenty-fourth century B.C.E.), issued an edict against social inequality, the earliest one extant (RIME 1: E1.9.5.5). The words of the inscription, “he established the liberation of Lagash and restored mother to child and child to mother,” indicate that he released those who were either taken as payment for debt or distracted to force payment. The text uses the term ama.r.gi4, a Sumerian term originally meaning “to return to the mother.” Here it becomes a technical term for “liberation, restoration to the original state.”

Urukagina (or Uruinimgina or Irikagina), ruler of Lagash in the mid-twenty-fourth century B.C.E., issued a reform decreeing a general amnesty, and declared himself as the rightful of social wrongs and the defender of the weak (RIME 1: E1.9.9.1-3). The inscription recounts that the common citizen was being abused by officials and priests who were demanding exorbitant fees, even for funerals. Officials and priests were appropriating improper charges, goods, and workers. Urukagina therefore regulated payments for certain services, and ordered that payment be accepted in kind instead of in silver. Certain taxes, for divorce or betrothal, were abolished. He forbade public officials from seeking extra compensation for their services from citizens. He released from prison all categories of offenders, debtors, thieves of various degrees, and killers (Steinkeller, 1991). He clarified that specific gods held ownership of specific property, not the king or queen. He regulated the behavior of women toward men. One version of the decree concludes that Urukagina made a covenant with the god Ningishu promising that he would protect the orphan and widow from the powerful. This reference to a covenant between a god and ruler is sui generis. Different professional and social groupings are mentioned, but it is not clear how they should be understood. Interestingly, there is no mention of slaves: that status was certainly in existence, but perhaps the number of slaves was not economically significant (Kuhrt, 1995).

It is debated whether Urukagina’s reform was decreed at the beginning of his reign (Edzard, 1974; Finkelstein, 1965; Hruška, 1973:1974; Kraus, 1987; Lambert, 1956). The decree recounts prior abuses, and this might indicate the motivation for the reform. Urukagina was not the son of the previous king and may have been a usurper. He may have taken the throne out of dissatisfaction with the earlier abuses or issued his decree to curry support for his accession to the throne. Some doubt has been cast on whether this reform actually took place.

Gudea, king of Lagash (twenty-second century B.C.E.), issued a reform restoring social peace and concord in society. According to two Hymns to Ningirsu, among the results of Gudea’s reform were that parents and children no longer argued and that masters no longer beat their servants (Kramer, 1989). The reform also protected the orphans and the widow from the rich and the powerful, and the reform established that a daughter could serve as the heir to a household lacking a male heir.

Ur III. A reform by the king Shulgi (r. 2044–2047 B.C.E.), recorded in hymns ascribed to him, was aimed at
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