

## Doing *Mishpat*

- The verbs paired most often with *mishpat* are action-oriented: to “do,” “execute,” and “keep.”<sup>i</sup>
- In Israel, *mishpat* was dynamic, causing change and making wrongs right again.<sup>ii</sup>
- There is a story from the life of Solomon gives us a great example of how to do *mishpat*.
- Before the story starts, we learn that Solomon gets an essential tool for doing justice: wisdom.
- Soon after Solomon became king, God appeared to him in a dream, saying that He would give Solomon anything he requested. Solomon asked for wisdom to rule his people well.

According to God, that was a great request:

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for wisdom. So God replied, “Because you have asked for wisdom in governing my people with justice [*mishpat*] and have not asked for a long life or wealth or the death of your enemies— I will give you what you asked for! I will give you a wise and understanding heart such as no one else has had or ever will have! (1 Kings 3:10-12 NLT)

- Why was God pleased that Solomon asked for wisdom? *Because it meant that Solomon would have the wisdom to govern his people with mishpat.*
- The following story is first time we see Solomon using the gift of wisdom to bring justice:  
Some time later two prostitutes came to the king to have an argument settled. “Please, my lord,” one of them began, “this woman and I live in the same house. I gave birth to a baby while she was with me in the house. Three days later this woman also had a baby. We were alone; there were only two of us in the house.  
“But her baby died during the night when she rolled over on it. Then she got up in the night and took my son from beside me while I was asleep. She laid her dead child in my arms and took mine to sleep beside her. And in the morning when I tried to nurse my son, he was dead! But when I looked more closely in the morning light, I saw that it wasn’t my son at all.”  
Then the other woman interrupted, “It certainly was your son, and the living child is mine.”  
“No,” the first woman said, “the living child is mine, and the dead one is yours.” And so they argued back and forth before the king.

## Demystifying Biblical Justice

Then the king said, “Let’s get the facts straight. Both of you claim the living child is yours, and each says that the dead one belongs to the other. <sup>24</sup>All right, bring me a sword.” So a sword was brought to the king.

Then he said, “Cut the living child in two, and give half to one woman and half to the other!”

Then the woman who was the real mother of the living child, and who loved him very much, cried out, “Oh no, my lord! Give her the child—please do not kill him!”

But the other woman said, “All right, he will be neither yours nor mine; divide him between us!”

Then the king said, “Do not kill the child, but give him to the woman who wants him to live, for she is his mother!” (1 Kings 3:26-27 GNT)

- Solomon knew that the real mother would have not cared about where her child was, as long as it was alive. This wisdom gave him the key needed to test the heart of the mother so that he could make sure the child went back to its true mom.
- The whole nation took notice:

And all Israel heard of the judgment [*mishpat*] that the king had rendered [*shaphat*], and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that **the wisdom of God was in him to do justice** [*mishpat*]. (1 Kings 3:28 ESV, my emphasis)
- The result of Solomon “doing *mishpat*” was the restoration of a relationship between a mother and her child.
- Notice what was missing: punishment. The mother who had stolen the other woman’s child in her grief and guilt was not prosecuted.
- God’s justice is higher than merely punishing someone who has committed an injustice—He desires to restore everything that was lost.

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<sup>i</sup> Schultz, Richard. “*Mishpat*.” Vol. 4 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

<sup>ii</sup> Morris, Leon. *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960.