

God Loves *Mishpat*

- *Mishpat* is essential for understanding God:
 - “All His ways are justice [*mishpat*].” (Deuteronomy 32:4 ESV)
 - “For the Lord loves justice [*mishpat*].” (Psalm 37:28a ESV)
 - “He has established his throne for justice [*mishpat*].” (Psalm 9:7a ESV)
- What is *mishpat*?
 - ***Mishpat* is an attribute of God** (see Isaiah 30:18, Malachi 2:17, Proverbs 29:26).
 - *Mishpat* is not just something that God does; it is who He is
 - ***Mishpat* is right order.**ⁱ
 - Theologian Bruce Waltke powerfully sums up *mishpat* as “to establish the heavenly norm or pattern on earth.”ⁱⁱ
 - *Mishpat* can be summarized as honoring and expressing God’s intended order for His creation.ⁱⁱⁱ
 - This means bringing the freedom-filled culture of heaven to earth in a practical way.
 - ***Mishpat* is the design for God’s physical dwelling place.**^{iv}
 - Can mean plan or design.^v
 - In three places, *mishpat* refers to the plan used to create a space for God’s presence to dwell on earth: The tabernacle of Moses (Exodus 26:30), Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 6:38), and the temple prophesied in Ezekiel (Ezekiel 42:11).
 - ***Mishpat* describes legal order and individual rights.**
 - Legal order is an important way to build and keep structure and stability in a nation.^{vi}
 - Commonly shows up in legal terms and can mean a case, verdict, right, commandment, decision, entitlement, or sentence (see Exodus 21:1, 24:3; Leviticus 18:4-5, 24:22, 26:46; Numbers 27:5, 35:29; Deuteronomy 4:8, 17:9, 18:3; 1 Kings 8:59; Psalm 9:4, 35:23, 140:12).^{vii}
 - *Mishpat* is expressed when someone is given what is due to them, whether their God-given rights or punishment when they’ve broken the law.^{viii}
 - Respecting the rights of others is respecting God’s order for human society—a way of practically showing God’s value for relationships.^{ix}

Demystifying Biblical Justice

- In Old Testament times, even when a nation had a law the government centered around a person—for instance, a king. In Israel’s case, their government centered around God, their ultimate King and Judge.^x
- Their *mishpat* started from their connection to God, while conforming to His laws and customs came second to that as an expression of relationship with Him.
- For Israel, that meant *mishpat* was active and revolutionary because it flowed first from God, not impersonal rules.^{xi}
- ***Mishpat* means “custom,” “manner,” or “routine.”**^{xixiii}
 - Can describe the custom of a god or king.
 - Other gods had their *mishpat*, customs and ways of living that people could imitate and follow (Judges 18:7 NASB).
 - The *mishpat* of Israel, again, came from their relationship with God and ordered their entire way of life.^{xiv}
- ***Mishpat* parallels deliverance, salvation and victory.**
 - Freedom for the oppressed, not punishment of the perpetrator, is the more important result of judgment.^{xv}
 - Whenever *mishpat* requires punishment, the purpose is to set things right again.^{xvi}
- Jewish rabbi and philosopher, Eliezer Berkovits, explains the biblical thinking of how judgement parallels deliverance in this way:

The purpose of judgment is to save the innocent from injustice. The idea is so deeply anchored in biblical thought that “to judge” becomes the equivalent of “to save.” Of the terrible anger of God, the psalmist says: “You caused the sentence to be heard from heaven; the earth feared, and was still. When God arose *to judgment, to save* all the humble of the earth.” God judges in order to save....If salvation is to go forth, judgment is to be instituted. And indeed from numerous passages in the Bible the idea that the function of the judge is to save....The commandment to judge is the responsibility to deliver.^{xvii}
- Berkovits also explains *mishpat* in this way:

Mishpat is done not that justice prevail, but that life prevail...Thus, while *mishpat* may be grim, it will always be an act of saving and deliverance...It is a principle of preservation; the restoration of a disturbed balance which is needed because life has become unbalanced.^{xviii}

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- ⁱ Oswalt, John N. "Justice and Righteousness." *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*. Vol. 2, Old Testament Dictionary. Edited by Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005. 606-609; Calvin, John, and William Pringle. *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010.
- ⁱⁱ Waltke, Bruce K. "Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part V: The Theology of Genesis 1–Continued," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133, 1975. 28-41.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mott, Stephen Charles. "Justice." *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Edited by Chad Brand, Charles W. Draper, and Archie W. England Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003.
- ^{iv} Waltke, "Creation Account".
- ^v Johnson, B. "Mišpāt." Vol. 9 of *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry. Translated by David E. Green. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998. 86-98.
- ^{vi} See Proverbs 29:4; Schultz, Richard. "Mishpat." Vol. 4 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. 837-846.
- ^{vii} Schultz, "Mishpat."
- ^{viii} Ibid.; Keller, Timothy. *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*. New York, NY: Dutton, Penguin Group USA, 2010.
- ^{ix} Sicker, Martin. *The Political Culture of Judaism*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001.
- ^x Culver, Robert D. "Shaphat." Vol. 2 of *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Edited by R. Laird Harris. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980.
- ^{xi} Morris, *Biblical Doctrine of Judgment*.
- ^{xii} See Genesis 40:13, 2 Kings 1:7-8, 2 Kings 11:14, 2 Kings 17:26, 1 Samuel 8:9, Judges 18:7.
- ^{xiii} Berkovits, Eliezer. "Biblical Idea of Justice." In *Essential Essays on Judaism*, edited by David Hazony, 129-154. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2005."; Johnson, "Mišpāt."
- ^{xiv} Morris, *Biblical Doctrine of Judgment*.
- ^{xv} Runesson, "Judgment", 457-466.
- ^{xvi} *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2010.
- ^{xvii} Berkovits, "Biblical Idea of Justice." Quote from page 135.
- ^{xviii} Ibid., 147.