

# Hebrew Versus Western Views of Justice

- Part of the challenge of learning about biblical justice is that our Western-ish views of justice are so different from Hebraic views from the time the Old Testament was originally written in.
- When an American Christian hears about justice, the images that we think of probably things like police officers, punishment, and courtrooms.
- Unfortunately, that can make us reject doing justice now because we think of it through our Western-ish lenses.
- **In the views of the Western world:**
  - Justice is primarily focused on *how things should be done*—laws, rules, and what should happen when laws are broken.
  - Justice has to be *enforced* by institutions like the police force, courts systems, and prisons.
  - Doing justice is the responsibility of only a few people, like police officers and lawyers.
  - Doing justice” meant not only “not doing wrong,”
  - For many of us, justice is something that is static, idealistic, and codified.<sup>i</sup>
- **In the views of the Hebrew world:**
  - Justice is focused on *what life should be like*.<sup>ii</sup>
    - Justice in the Hebrew world was concerned not just with laws, but with enhancing all human life,
    - The Hebrew word that sums up “what life should be like” is *shalom*.
    - *Shalom* comes from a root word that means “to be complete” or “to be sound.”<sup>iii</sup>
    - *Shalom* is a peace that comes from everything being complete and whole, so there it can be translated also as security, well-being, or prosperity.<sup>iv</sup>
    - The purpose of justice in Hebrew society was to restore and sustain *shalom*.<sup>v</sup>
  - “Doing justice” meant actively doing right and restoring what is broken.<sup>vi</sup>
  - Justice was done by everyone and was everyone’s responsibility.
    - People took ownership of the *shalom* and wholeness of their community; and, if something was wrong, they worked to right it, even if it wasn’t their fault.
  - Justice was *taught* not merely enforced.<sup>vii</sup>
  - The laws are not given line by line in a strict code; they are backed up with teaching and encouragement.<sup>viii</sup>

- o Justice is dynamic, realistic, and creative.<sup>ix</sup>

# Western Versus Hebrew Views of Justice

Western	Hebrew
Justice is <i>static, idealistic, and codified</i> .	Justice is <i>dynamic, realistic, and creative</i> .
Justice is focused on <i>how things should be done</i> : making laws and enforcing them.	Justice is focused on <i>what life should be like</i> : creating shalom and enhancing all human life.
Justice is the responsibility of and done by a <i>few</i> .	Justice is the responsibility of and done by <i>everyone</i> .
Justice belongs in the <i>public, legal parts</i> of the world.	Justice belongs in <i>all</i> parts of a culture.
Justice is <i>enforced</i> —by public agencies like the police department, courts, or lawyers.	Justice is <i>taught</i> —to everyone.
Justice shapes <i>behavior</i> .	Justice shapes <i>hearts</i> .
Justice is <i>not doing wrong</i> .	Justice is actively <i>doing right</i> and restoring what is broken.

Source: God Loves Justice: A User-Friendly Guide to Biblical Justice and Righteousness

<sup>i</sup> Gibbs, J.G. "Just." Vol. 2 of *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: E-J*. Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> Schwarzschild, Steven S. "Justice." Vol. 2 of *Encyclopedia Judaica, 2nd Edition*. Edited by Fred Skolnik. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House/Thomson Gale, 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> Carpenter, Eugene E. and Philip W. Comfort. "Peace." In *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000.

# Demystifying Biblical Justice

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- <sup>iv</sup> Gesenius, Wilhelm, and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles. "שְׁלוֹם". *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003.
- <sup>v</sup> Schneider, W. "Judgment." Vol. 2 of *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Colin Brown. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986. 362-367.; Mafico, Temba L. "Just, Justice." Vol. 3 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman et al. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 1127-1128.
- <sup>vi</sup> Morris, Leon. *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960.
- <sup>vii</sup> Houston, Walter. *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament*. London: T & T Clark, 2006. 107, 131.
- <sup>viii</sup> Houston, "Contending for Justice," 107.
- <sup>ix</sup> Gibbs, J.G. "Just."