

Rivers versus Scales

- In the Western world, justice is often symbolized by “Lady Justice,” a blindfolded woman holding a sword and scales:



(Source: https://chr.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Statua_Justitiae.jpg)

- That symbol is from the Roman goddess, Justitia, showing that justice is impartial, standard, and orderly.
- The balances weigh the two sides of a case and determines which one is right.
- Getting justice is a strict, fair, and mechanical process- involving zero passion and emotion.
- Compare to an image for justice from the book of Amos: **a river**.
 - In the book of Amos, the prophet confronts the nation of Israel over some massive injustices that the nation was committing (Amos 2:6-8, 4:1, 8:4-7).
 - At the same time, the nation was continuing their religious activities. God has this response to seeing all these activities:

“I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen. (Amos 5:21-23 ESV)
- God goes on to say what He wants:

But let justice [*mishpat*] roll down like waters,
and righteousness [*sedeqah*] like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24 ESV)

Demystifying Biblical Justice

- In response to the nation's unfaithfulness and injustice, God wanted justice and righteousness, not more religious activities.
- The water analogies are significant:
 - The phrase "roll down like waters" would suggest not just a trickle of water but floodwaters moving fully and unencumbered throughout the land.ⁱ
 - The fact that "waters" is plural suggests that the water would suddenly and forcefully swell.
 - The word for stream doesn't have an English equivalent, it refers to a type of stream that's specific to the geography of Israel.
 - It refers to narrow streams common throughout Israel. In the rainy season, it would gush and overflow with water, but during dry times, it would be a mere trickle if it had any water at all.ⁱⁱ
 - Instead of songs, sacrifices, assemblies, or offerings, God expected *mishpat* and *sedeq* to flow unencumbered continually from that generation onward, never growing dry no matter the season.
- The Jewish philosopher and theologian Abraham Joseph Heschel contrasts Amos' river with in his book "The Prophets" this way:

"A surging movement, a life-bringing substance, a dominant power. A mighty stream, expressive of the vehemence of a never-ending, surging, fighting movement- as if obstacles had to be washed away for justice to be done. Justice is more than an ideal or a norm: justice is charged with the omnipotence of God. What ought to, shall be! ... Balancing is possible when the scales are unimpaired, and the judge's eyes sound. When the eyes are dim and the scales unsure, what is required is a power that will strike and change, heal and restore, like a mighty stream bringing life to a parched land... Righteousness is a vast and mighty stream because God is its unfailing source."ⁱⁱⁱ
- These contrasting images- the scales and the river- give an illustration of how different justice in our modern Western world is from justice the biblical world.
 - This is important for both understanding and applying Biblical justice.
 - The justice and righteousness Christians get to do looks like a river-a forceful, never-ending gush of water that makes wrongs right, pushing away any obstacle in the way of restoration and wholeness.

ⁱ Gill, John. *An Exposition of the Entire Bible*. London: William Hill Collingridge, 1852.

ⁱⁱ Smith, Billy K., and Franklin S. Page. *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*. The New American Commentary Series, edited by E. Ray Clendenen et al. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. Quote from page 271-272.