

## Old Testament Foundations for Justice in Society

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In working to develop a theology of societal justice, one quickly recognizes the weightiness of the material on the subject in the OT. One immediately faces tensions as well. America is not Israel, and Scripture does not expect every detail of Israel's societal structure to be replicated in the nations of the world. Furthermore, the church is not Israel. The church—whether universal or local—is not a socio-political body, and its nature and mission differ significantly from those of Israel. Writers in the Reformed orbit make this point. DeYoung and Gilbert state, “We are concerned that in all our passion for renewing the city or tackling social problems, we run the risk of marginalizing the one thing that makes Christian mission Christian: namely, making disciples of Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> This concern is especially a staple of dispensationalism. As McCune says, “The institutional church is not given a mandate to enter the political arena or to be the social watchdog of the world in any corporate sense. . . . The Great Commission says nothing about social or political factors; preaching and teaching are the church's purposes.”<sup>3</sup>

This is true but raises the question: what should the church preach and teach to Jesus's disciples? Jesus himself answered the question in the Great Commission: “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:20).<sup>4</sup> One of the things Jesus taught was the role of the OT as a divinely inspired source of ethical instruction (e.g., 5:17ff).<sup>5</sup> This included identifying two commands as the greatest and as capturing the essence of the OT law: love for God and love for neighbor (22:35–40). Though these commands come from texts of the law Yahweh gave Israel as part of his covenant with that nation (Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18), they reflect patently universal ethical norms.<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of the Biblical Christianity, Volume 3: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 203.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>5</sup> See Ken Casillas, *The Law and the Christian: God's Light within God's Limits*, Biblical Discernment for Difficult Issues (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2008); idem, *Beyond Chapter and Verse: The Theology and Practice of Biblical Application* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 100–114.

<sup>6</sup> Dispensationalist Alva J. McClain writes, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, speaking of man's obligation to his fellowmen, lays down the second great commandment, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’ (Matt. 22:39). This is the law—the law of God. And we dare not and cannot change it. But come on this side of Calvary and hear the voice of the same Lord as He speaks through John, ‘Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another’ (I John 4:11). *It is the same*

fact, one of Jesus's authorized spokesmen, the Apostle Paul, taught that the gospel enables NT believers to fulfill the OT law's ideal of love for neighbor (Rom 13:8–10; Gal 5:13–23).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the writers of the NT draw on a wide variety of OT material in teaching God's people concerning ethics in this age.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Paul made this practice programmatic for NT preachers. He asserted that the OT Scripture is profitable for Christian sanctification and urged Timothy to preach that "word" to NT believers (2 Tm 3:14–4:2).<sup>9</sup>

In view of this imperative, the present study analyzes and synthesizes key data that demonstrate the foundational contribution of the OT toward a theology of justice in society. The first three-quarters of the Bible teaches values, desires, and goals of God concerning societal life in his world. The OT thereby nurtures in Jesus's disciple the right heart toward fellow human beings and informs his conduct through transhistorical ethical paradigms.<sup>10</sup> As his worldview is increasingly molded by God's Word, the believer will grow in the wisdom needed to discern the specifics of societal life to pursue in his particular setting.

Toward these objectives, this article surveys the theme of societal justice along the storyline of the OT, centering on key Hebrew terminology related to this theme. The article focuses on exegesis and biblical theology but also incorporates suggestive reflection on contemporary relevance.<sup>11</sup> Material is drawn from five major periods that contain a bulk of the OT material on societal justice: Primeval, Patriarchal, Mosaic, United Monarchy, and Prophetic. Given space constraints over against the

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*duty*, but now enshrined in the context of grace." McClain goes on to moderate the discontinuity in this statement: "But although dispensational distinctions are genuine and may be clearly observed, we are not to suppose that 'the context of grace' is completely absent from the earlier parts of Scripture." *Law and Grace: A Study of New Testament Concepts as They Relate to the Christian Life* (1954; reprint, Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1967), 65–66 (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> Dispensationalist Myron Houghton explains Romans 13:8–10 by making "a distinction between the law itself and the righteous standard of the law. . . . Spirit-controlled believers are free from the law of sin and death, but exhibit the righteous requirement of the law in their lives." *Law and Grace* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist, 2011), 119–20. Similarly, progressive covenantalist Thomas R. Schreiner writes: "The commands Paul cites from the Decalogue are required not because they are in the Mosaic law (since believers aren't under that law any longer) or because they are part of the Decalogue. They are required because they belong to the law of Christ, and the law of Christ includes the moral norms of the law." Furthermore, Paul's statement, "and if there is any other commandment" (v. 9), "demonstrates that love is compatible with other norms of the law, which are unstated due to space constraints." *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 674.

<sup>8</sup> See Casillas, *Beyond Chapter and Verse*, 115–37; Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 159–205.

<sup>9</sup> "All of the Book—every part of it, no matter how small—will be found 'profitable' for the saved. We cannot dispense with any of it without loss to ourselves. In this connection, it needs to be emphasized without any compromise, that 'all scripture' includes the law of Moses. . . . We are not *under* the law; but because that law is inspired Scripture, it is full of valuable doctrine and useful lessons for us." McClain, 56.

<sup>10</sup> On discerning the heart of God in Bible application, see Mark L. Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times: Understanding and Applying God's Word Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 69–92. On transhistorical paradigms see Casillas, *Beyond Chapter and Verse*, 208–26; Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 314–25.

<sup>11</sup> In the fall of 2019 I taught a doctoral course on OT hermeneutics and exegetical method, and I assigned the students to write their major papers on aspects of the OT's teaching regarding societal justice. While the present article reflects my own work, students Jonathon Davis, Nate Labadorf, Kristian Römer, and Sam Stephens helped to advance my thinking on the subject, and I thank them for their input.

breadth of the information available, the discussion must be highly selective but will sufficiently illustrate the ongoing role of the OT for understanding what pleases God in societal life.<sup>12</sup>

### *Societal Justice in the Primeval Period*

Though the opening chapters of Genesis do not dwell on societal justice, they lay the theological foundation for this theme. That foundation is the *imago Dei*. Scholars debate various details of the image.<sup>13</sup> Did God create humanity *in* his image or *as* his image? Is the image a set of qualities/abilities, or is it humanity's function of exercising dominion over the earth, or some combination of both? Regardless of how such questions are answered, the *imago* remains basic to the Bible's teaching on humanity and human society. That the image of God transcends secondary distinctions or differing roles among people is implied by the facts that both male and female are made in this image and both together are called **אָדָם** (Gn 1:26–27; 5:1–2). The same follows from the transmission of the image from father to child (5:1–3). Justice would surely ensue from thoroughgoing respect for all human beings as equal image-bearers. As Grudem says, the *imago* “means that people of

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<sup>12</sup> Resources for more detailed study abound. Book-length introductions include Bruce B. Birch, *What Does the Lord Require? The Old Testament Call to Social Witness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); Michael Barram, *Missional Economics: Biblical Justice and Christian Formation*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018); Mark T. Coppenger, *A Christian View of Justice* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983); Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Penguin, 2010); Bruce V. Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible: What Is Old and What Is New*, Religious Orders (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical/Michael Glazier, 1996); H. G. M. Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good: Old Testament Justice Then and Now*, The Trinity Lectures, Singapore, 2011 (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth, 2012). In-depth works include Léon Epszstein, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1986); Norman K. Gottwald, *Social Justice and the Hebrew Bible*, The Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice Series, 3 vols. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016, 2018); Richard H. Hiers, *Justice and Compassion in Biblical Law* (New York: Continuum, 2009); Walter J. Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 428 (London: T & T Clark, 2006); idem, *Justice for the Poor? Social Justice in the Old Testament in Concept and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020); J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman, eds., *Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and Their Influence*, JSOTSupp 137 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1992); Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Cynthia Long Westfall and Bryan R. Dyer, eds., *The Bible and Social Justice: Old Testament and New Testament Foundations for the Church's Urgent Call*, McMaster New Testament Studies (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015); and Wright.

Such works approach their subject from a variety of theological perspectives. In reading discerningly, one should consider five key questions: (1) What is the author's view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture? (2) What is his understanding of the gospel? (3) What is his understanding of the relationship between Israel and the nations of the world? (4) What is his understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church? (5) To what degree has he been influenced by extrabiblical—or unbiblical—ideologies regarding social issues?

<sup>13</sup> For an introduction to the issues, see Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 160–75. For detailed discussion, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Man: The Image of God*, trans. Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); Gerald Bray, “The Significance of God's Image in Man,” *TynBul* 42/2 (1991): 195–225; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau, eds., *The Image of God in an Image-Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, Wheaton Theology Conference Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016); G. A. Jónsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26–28 in a Century of Old Testament Research*, Coniectanea Biblica OT Series, trans. L. Svendsen (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988); Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015).

every race deserve equal dignity and rights. It means that elderly people, those seriously ill, the mentally retarded, and children yet unborn, deserve full protection and honor as human beings.”<sup>14</sup>

What becomes of such justice when the image of God is not respected? Grudem answers: “If we ever deny our unique status in creation as God’s only image-bearers, we will soon begin to depreciate the value of human life, will tend to see humans as merely a higher form of animal, and will begin to treat others as such. We will also lose much of our sense of meaning in life.”<sup>15</sup> This is exactly what happened when sin entered the human race. Following Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, the first narrative records Cain’s murder of his brother Abel (Gn 4:1ff). Two chapters later one reads that “the earth was filled with violence” (6:11, 13). The judgment of the flood did not solve the problem. Afterward God stipulated capital punishment as the penalty for murder precisely because of the value of the *imago Dei* (Gn 9:6).

### *Societal Justice in the Patriarchal Period*

Thankfully, the biblical storyline concentrates on God’s work to restore his image and his kingdom on earth. Material within and beyond Genesis relates to initial developments in this regard.

#### The Calling of Abraham

In Genesis 12 God sketches his plan for overturning sin and the curse and restoring his kingdom on earth: he would bless all families of the earth through Abram (v. 3). Many other passages indicate that this blessing centers on Christ and his redemptive work, but Genesis includes in the blessing a dimension that is easily missed. On his way to judge Sodom and Gomorrah, “The LORD said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him’” (18:17–19). Yahweh’s intent is not only for “righteousness and justice” to characterize Abraham’s descendants but also to contribute to his plan for the nations. As Mathews puts it, the calling of Abraham to bless the world “included the intermediary step of creating a righteous people whose conduct would be a beacon for the nations.”<sup>16</sup> This early revelation establishes the broad universal context within which to understand all the instruction and legislation on societal justice that the OT goes on to give Abraham’s progeny.<sup>17</sup>

Foundational here is defining the expression *righteousness and justice*. The first term translates צְדָקָה (159x in the OT). Detailed analysis of this noun requires comparison and contrast with its twin

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<sup>14</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 450.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 223.

<sup>17</sup> For a study of the creational context of Israel’s laws, see James K. Bruckner, *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis*, JSOTSupp 335 (London: Sheffield, 2001).

צֶדֶק (119x) as well as examination of their corresponding verb צָדַק (41x) and adjective צָדִיק (205x). Essential definition is facilitated by the fact that these words share the idea of “conformity to a standard.”<sup>18</sup> This is implied by the typical English gloss for צָדִיק and צָדַק: *righteousness* or, more simply, *rightness*. For someone or something to be “right” requires some standard against which he or it is being evaluated. Genesis 18:19 is only the second time Scripture uses צָדִיק (the first being 15:6), and the verse does not state what standard God has in mind for Abraham and his descendants. It is clearly a standard of conduct, however: something Abraham’s descendants are to do (עֲשֵׂה) as part of keeping (שָׁמַר) the way (דֶּרֶךְ) of Yahweh.

The standard becomes clearer from the term accompanying צָדִיק: “justice,” מִשְׁפָּט, appears in Genesis 18:19 for the first of 424 times in the OT. Though this noun conveys many nuances in the OT,<sup>19</sup> Genesis 18 itself provides help for defining the term in relation to the subject of the present article. As Abraham begins to intercede on behalf of Lot, he pleads, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge [Qal participle of שָׁפַט] of all the earth do what is just [מִשְׁפָּט]?” (18:23–25). Abraham’s closing question connects מִשְׁפָּט with the verb from which it derives, שָׁפַט, to judge (204x). Here מִשְׁפָּט represents the ideal of treating people in a way that corresponds with their conduct. More specifically, מִשְׁפָּט must guide someone who is meting out legal penalties, leading him to punish the guilty and spare the innocent. This is what English speakers typically have in mind with the term *justice*, and it includes ideals more technically known as “procedural” and “retributive” justice. Based on the belief that all human beings are equal in the eyes of the law, procedural justice guarantees due legal process for all. Retributive justice requires that offending parties receive punishment according to their offenses.<sup>20</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that these two concepts are significant components of מִשְׁפָּט in Yahweh’s statement in verse 19.

Interestingly, Genesis 18 also illustrates the injustice that is the opposite of מִשְׁפָּט. The reason Yahweh punishes Sodom and Gomorrah is because of the “outcry” against these cities (זַעֲקָה, v. 20; צַעֲקָה, v. 21; 19:13). The root of צַעֲקָה occurs for the first time in Genesis 4:10, in God’s response to Cain after he killed Abel: “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying [Qal participle of צָעַק] to me from the ground.” This is the first of several passages showing that these

<sup>18</sup> This view enjoys broad consensus among scholars. For detailed defense, see David J. Reimer, “צָדִיק,” *NIDOTTE*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:744–69; compare “צָדִיק (*šādēq*) be just, righteous,” *TWOT*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:752–55. For a differing approach, see K. Koch, “צָדִיק *šdq* to be communally faithful beneficial,” *TLOT*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 2:1046–1062. As evident in the discussion below, Koch’s communal emphasis is in view in a number of צָדִיק usages but can be subsumed under the broader “conformity to a standard” rubric.

<sup>19</sup> For surveys, compare Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, “מִשְׁפָּט,” *HALOT*, rev. Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, study ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:651–51; “מִשְׁפָּט,” *DCH*, ed. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 5:556–64. For more detailed study, see G. Liedke, “שָׁפַט *špṭ* to judge,” *TLOT*, 3:1392–99.

<sup>20</sup> For definitions of justice-related terms, see the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>.

terms for “outcry” denote “the cry of the oppressed because of harsh treatment.”<sup>21</sup> In addition to homosexuality, Genesis points to the sin of injustice in Sodom and Gomorrah. Note the violent way in which the men of Sodom attempted to pursue the angels who visited Lot (19:1–10).

### The Example of Job

Though the Book of Job was likely composed in the Solomonic period, Job himself seems to have lived around or before Abraham’s time, southeast or northeast of Canaan.<sup>22</sup> No evidence connects Job to the line of Abraham or the Abrahamic Covenant. Nevertheless, the book that bears his name repeatedly presents him as living an exemplary life flowing from the fear of God (e.g., Job 1:1, 8, 22; 2:3, 10). Job’s just treatment of others is a major element of his example.

As Job’s friends strain to identify the sins that allegedly brought about his calamities, they increasingly turn to his actions toward disadvantaged people. In chapter 22 Eliphaz makes these accusations (vv. 6–9):

For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing  
and stripped the naked of their clothing.  
You have given no water to the weary to drink,  
and you have withheld bread from the hungry.  
The man with power possessed the land,  
and the favored man lived in it.  
You have sent widows away empty,  
and the arms of the fatherless were crushed.

Eliphaz connects this disgraceful conduct with a dismissive attitude toward God himself (vv. 12–20). Talbert comments,

For Eliphaz to link the severity of Job’s punishment to these kinds of crimes reveals how seriously such social responsibilities were regarded and how profoundly interconnected man’s religion was perceived to be with his treatment of others. . . . We tend to emphasize spiritual sins such as idolatry, or moral sins such as adultery, and minimize the seriousness of social and humanitarian sins such as oppression and neglect. This fails to give adequate weight to other issues with which God has historically been concerned.<sup>23</sup>

Chapters 29–31 record Job’s climactic self-defense over against the outrageous charges of his friends. In 29:14 he makes the general statement, “I put on righteousness [צִדִּיק], and it clothed me; my justice [מִשְׁפָּט] was like a robe and a turban.” The verses that flank this statement illustrate the kinds of behaviors that in Job’s mind qualify as צִדִּיק and מִשְׁפָּט.

<sup>21</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 20.

<sup>22</sup> On the identity of Job and the composition of the Book of Job, compare Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity, 1976), 64–66, 81–84; Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 429–34; John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 15–20, 65–67; Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 500–502; Layton Talbert, *Beyond Suffering: Discovering the Message of Job* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2007), 6–8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 329n7.

When the ear heard, it called me blessed,  
 and when the eye saw, it approved,  
 because I delivered the poor who cried for help,  
 and the fatherless who had none to help him.  
 The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me,  
 and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.  
 I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;  
 my justice was like a robe and a turban.  
 I was eyes to the blind  
 and feet to the lame.  
 I was a father to the needy,  
 and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know.  
 I broke the fangs of the unrighteous  
 and made him drop his prey from his teeth. (vv. 11–17)

This passage does not focus on unjust actions that Job avoided. Instead, **צָדִיק** and **מִשְׁפָּט** describe his positive actions of providing material aid to the poor and legal defense to the oppressed.<sup>24</sup>

Job expounds on such actions at greater length in chapter 31, and these are summarized with the term **צִדִּיק** (32:1). At least for the modern reader, part of this passage introduces tension since it takes for granted a kind of slavery.

If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant,  
 when they brought a complaint against me,  
 what then shall I do when God rises up?  
 When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?  
 Did not he who made me in the womb make him?  
 And did not one fashion us in the womb? (31:13–15)

Detailing the OT's approach to slavery is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>25</sup> One must, however, bear in mind considerable differences between slavery in the time of Job and slavery in modern times. To begin with, in any given passage the Hebrew terminology for “slave” may or may not denote the level of ownership or control implied by the English word *slave*. This becomes apparent even in comparing English translations. For instance, while the NASB of Job 31:13 speaks of “male or female slaves,” the ESV uses the softer glosses *manservant* (**עֶבֶד**) and *maidservant* (**אִמָּה**).<sup>26</sup> Additionally, in the Ancient

<sup>24</sup> On the broader significance of **מִשְׁפָּט** for the message of the Book of Job, see Sylvia Huberman Scholnick, “The Meaning of *Mišpaṭ* in the Book of Job,” *JBL* 101/4 (1982): 521–29.

<sup>25</sup> For surveys of the OT's handling of slavery, see Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1991), 98–100, 288–90; Wright, 333–37. For detailed analyses, see Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, *JSOTSup* 141 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic 1993); Isaac Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Study of Slavery in Babylonia, Assyria, Syria, and Palestine from the Middle of the Third Millennium to the End of the First Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949); Thomas Schirrmacher, ed., *The Humanisation of Slavery in the Old Testament*, World of Theology Series 8 (2015; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018). For a popular-level discussion specifically in response to contemporary attacks on the biblical worldview, see Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 124–149.

<sup>26</sup> The following definition reflects the fluidity of OT terminology for servanthood/slavery: “‘*ebed* ‘servant’ is governed within the word field of social order by the antonym → ‘*ādōn* “lord” in its meaning as a term of relation and, consequently, may not be limited—at least not in the first instance—to a precisely defined designation of status (‘slave,’

Near East (ANE) people generally became servants/slaves not because they were kidnapped but because they were prisoners of war or needed to pay debts or otherwise avoid financial ruin in what could be an extremely unstable and dangerous society.<sup>27</sup>

Slaves did occupy a low social status and were often despised, however. Within this setting, what stands out about Job is not that he owned slaves but that he was so committed to treating them justly (v. 13). This commitment grew out of his sense of accountability to God (v. 14) and his recognition that both master and slave are equally created by God (v. 15). “His faith led him to a liberated attitude toward those who were usually considered as having little worth. In this regard he was way ahead of his time.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, Wright calls Job 31:15 “the highest point of the Old Testament’s ethical critique of slavery.”<sup>29</sup>

For the present purposes the main lesson is that Job understood his actions toward others to be inherently good and required apart from any legislation given to Abraham’s descendants. This understanding could have derived from non-inscripturated special revelation, “natural theology,” common sense, a sensitive conscience, and/or upbringing informed by these. In fact, scholars have extensively chronicled statements similar to Job’s from various pagan ANE cultures.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the case, Job’s testimony has a timeless character that makes it especially relevant for the believer striving to live in a God-pleasing way in the world today.

### *Societal Justice in the Mosaic Period*

Given what Yahweh says in Genesis 18:19, the Mosaic law emphasizes the need for justice in Israelite society. The Torah explicitly labels a variety of laws with justice-related terminology. For example, the required accuracy of selling/trading measurements is described in terms of both צֶדֶק (Lv 19:36; Dt 25:13–16) and מִשְׁפָּט (Lv 19:35). Viewing justice from the standpoint of the person receiving it, מִשְׁפָּט can refer to “rights,” what rightfully belongs to a person. A priestly law makes this point: “And this shall be the priests’ due [מִשְׁפָּט] from the people, from those offering a sacrifice, whether an ox or a sheep: they shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach” (Dt 18:3). Likewise, Deuteronomy 21:17 uses מִשְׁפָּט for the right of the firstborn to a double portion of his father’s inheritance.

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e.g., Exod 21:2, 32) or a descriptive functional designation (‘worker’; cf. Job 7:2 ‘*ebed* who longs for the shadows’ par. ‘day laborer, who hopes for wages’). . . . As a term of relation, ‘*ebed*’ is given content (‘bondsmen, subordinate, subject, vassal, mercenary, official, minister’) by the context in which one is the subordinate of one’s lord (or lady). . . . In the social sphere, ‘*ebed*’ commonly designates the slave in the OT. It is not, however, a technical term in the sense of Eng. ‘slave,’ which necessarily involves a negative preconception. One may never forget either that the same word can describe the officer and the minister of the king or the nuance of the term in the self-designation ‘your servant.’” Claus Westermann, “עֶבֶד ‘*ebed* servant,” *TLOT*, 2:821–22.

<sup>27</sup> See especially Chirichigno, Mendelsohn, and Schirmacher.

<sup>28</sup> Hartley, 415.

<sup>29</sup> *Old Testament Ethics*, 337.

<sup>30</sup> See especially Epsztein and Weinfeld. While helpful, such studies can minimize the uniqueness of biblical revelation. For an older but thoroughly orthodox presentation, see Richard D. Patterson, “The Widow, the Orphan, and the Poor in the Old Testament and the Extra-Biblical Literature,” *BSac* 130/519 (1973): 223–34.



Many Mosaic laws focus on the role of officials who render rulings in “court” cases. They must “justify [Hiphil of צדק: declare righteous] the righteous [צדיק] and condemn the wicked” (Dt 25:1, NASB). They must decide all cases with impartiality (משפט in Ex 23:6; Lv 19:15; Dt 1:17; 27:19; צדק in Lv 19:15). Deuteronomy 16:18–20 is especially notable for how it interchanges the vocabulary:

You shall appoint judges [Qal participle of שפט] and officers in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge [Qal of שפט] the people with righteous judgment [משפט-צדק, judgment of righteousness]. You shall not pervert justice [משפט]. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous [צדיק]. Justice [צדק], and only justice [צדק], you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

Likewise, legal penalties must be applied equally to all classes of people. The *lex talionis* includes this provision: “You shall have the same rule [משפט] for the sojourner<sup>31</sup> and for the native, for I am the LORD your God” (Lv 24:22; cf. Ex 21:31).

Contemporary readers of the OT would recognize the above laws as reflections of justice. Other passages in the Torah, however, blur the line between modern categories of justice and benevolence. Deuteronomy 10:17 proclaims, “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.” The last statement corresponds to the laws against impartiality in juridical affairs, but verse 18 begins with a more active form of משפט: “He executes justice [משפט] for the fatherless and the widow.” This refers to defending and delivering vulnerable people who are being treated unfairly or oppressed.<sup>32</sup> The rest of verse 18 is even more active: “And [he] loves [Qal participle of אהב] the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.” On this basis, verse 19 urges, “Love [Qal imperatival perfect of אהב] the

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<sup>31</sup> Mosaic laws regarding the sojourner or alien (גר) are of special significance for contemporary debates concerning justice in the realm of immigration. For a survey of the data, see Georges Chawkat Moucarry, “The Alien According to the Torah,” *Themelios* 14/1 (1988): 17–20. For detailed study, see David G. Firth, *Including the Stranger: Foreigners in the Former Prophets*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2019); J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003); Christiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law: A Study of the Changing Legal Status of Strangers in Ancient Israel*, JSOTSupp 107 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1991). When it comes to application, balancing the various strands of biblical teaching is admittedly difficult. James K. Hoffmeier analyzes the various OT “foreigner” terms and provides helpful biblical and extrabiblical data concerning the existence of state borders in the ANE. Yet his argument that the OT גר is equivalent to today’s “legal” alien seems strained. See *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009). On the other hand, M. Daniel Carroll R. uses the OT גר laws as a key part of a case for immigration reform. Carroll’s approach to Romans 13:1–7 is questionable, however, allowing for the violation of immigration law if that law is deemed unjust. See *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013); *The Bible and Borders: Hearing God’s Word on Immigration* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020). Ultimately, Christians should evaluate their country’s immigration laws and use their influence to promote legislation that is most in keeping with biblical ideals and patterns. Toward this end, two additional works merit consideration: Robert W. Heimbürger, *God and the Illegal Alien: United States Immigration Law and a Theology of Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Law and Christianity (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Tisha M. Rajendra, *Migrants and Citizens: Justice and Responsibility in the Ethics of Immigration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> See Robert G. Bratcher and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Deuteronomy*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2000), 205.

sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” The juxtaposition of justice and love is striking.

Similarly, in legislating on lending practices Deuteronomy 24 says, “And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge. You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness [צִדְקָה] for you before the LORD your God” (vv. 12–13). The NET Bible translates צִדְקָה here as “a just deed.” The point is simply that compassionate treatment of the poor man is “the right thing to do.”<sup>33</sup> The passage goes on to speak of מִשְׁפָּט and compassion in the same breath: “You shall not pervert the justice [מִשְׁפָּט] due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow’s garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this” (vv. 17–18).

Four key points emerge from studying the Mosaic laws on societal justice. First, one should not distinguish sharply between מִשְׁפָּט and צִדְקָה terms. Some scholars hold that the dominant idea of the root שפט is the restoration of שְׁלוֹם to relationships following a disruption.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Keller comments: “These two words [מִשְׁפָּט and צִדְקָה] roughly correspond to what some have called ‘primary’ and ‘rectifying justice.’ Rectifying justice is *mishpat*. It means punishing wrongdoers and caring for the victims of unjust treatment. Primary justice, or *tzadeqah* [*sic*], is behavior that, if it was prevalent in the world, would render rectifying justice unnecessary, because everyone would be living in right relationship to everyone else.”<sup>35</sup> Keller’s qualified statement *roughly correspond* is important in making such a distinction. As seen in several verses cited above (e.g., Lv 19:15), the צִדְקָה word family can refer to rectifying justice. Conversely, the use of מִשְׁפָּט for the priest’s food allotment (Dt 18:3) sounds like primary rather than rectifying justice. Especially significant are the cases in which מִשְׁפָּט and צִדְקָה words work together to communicate a single idea. Weinfeld analyzes the hendiadys מִשְׁפָּט וְצִדְקָה and similar expressions in the Hebrew Bible and other ANE literature. He argues that such expressions convey the ancient ideal of “social justice.” This ideal relates to all levels of society: those in official positions such as judges and kings but also common people in their everyday interactions. It includes making fair judicial decisions and enacting just laws. It also includes releasing or rescuing people from oppressive circumstances as well as contributing materially in order to help deliver fellow human beings from destitution.<sup>36</sup> Similar to Weinfeld, the present study has shown the variety of societal expectations associated with מִשְׁפָּט/צִדְקָה, and more is to come.

Second, the connection between some acts of benevolence and מִשְׁפָּט/צִדְקָה suggests that other Mosaic acts of benevolence may be characterized with these terms even when the terms are not used in the legislation. One thinks of the requirement that the Israelites leave harvest gleanings for the poor to gather (Lv 19:9–10; 23:22; Dt 24:19–22). Other examples include the distribution to the needy

<sup>33</sup> See *ibid.*, 402.

<sup>34</sup> See Liedke, 3:1393; *HALOT*, 2:1623.

<sup>35</sup> *Generous Justice*, 7–8, citing Wright, 257. Rather than using the better-known categories *retributive justice* and *distributive justice*, Keller borrows the labels *rectifying justice* and *primary justice* from Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), ix–x.

<sup>36</sup> See *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, especially 7–44.

from the third-year tithe (Dt 26:12–15) and the economic relief of the Sabbatical Year (Ex 23:10–11; Lv 25:1–7; Dt 15:1–18) and the Year of Jubilee (Lv 25:8–34). These mechanisms do not imply that wealth is evil, nor do they advocate redistribution of wealth as promoted by modern socialistic schemes. As humane “safety nets,” however, they give members of the covenant community their “due” in that they provide ways for them to avoid utter humiliation or devastation.<sup>37</sup>

Third, as seen in Deuteronomy 10:17–19 and other texts, Mosaic societal justice is not driven simply or fundamentally by concern for other humans. Instead the overriding motive is to reflect God’s character and honor him. As Wright notes, “For Israel . . . justice was no abstract concept or philosophical definition. Justice was essentially theological. It was rooted in the character of the LORD, their God; it flowed from his actions in history; it was demanded by his covenant relationship with Israel; it would ultimately be established on the earth by his sovereign power. . . . Justice on earth flows from justice in heaven.”<sup>38</sup> Consequently, people cannot understand or pursue justice adequately unless they come to know God.

Fourth, Israel’s societal justice was not for the sake of this one nation only. Toward the beginning of Deuteronomy Moses declares:

See, I have taught you statutes and rules [משפטים=legal pronouncements, ordinances], as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules [משפטים] so righteous [צדיקים] as all this law that I set before you today?

Moses anticipates that if Israel’s society were ordered according to God’s laws, the nations of the world would be impressed and drawn to Israel and her God. The implication is that the wisdom and righteousness of Israel’s laws—including laws regarding justice—should inform the laws made in other nations. Merrill puts it this way: “Even the pagan nations—by whom wisdom was prized and highly sought after—would see in Israel’s covenant provisions a wisdom of a higher order, one to be eagerly emulated. This, of course, was part of the attraction of Israel by which they were to become a means of blessing the whole earth.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, Deuteronomy 4:5–8 reinforces what Yahweh said in Genesis 18:19 concerning his purpose for Abraham’s descendants. It also encourages readers to identify in Israel’s laws universal patterns of societal justice that transcend the particulars of the theocracy and that provide guidance for dealing with contemporary issues. Wright suggests helpful questions to ask in this process:

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<sup>37</sup> See E. Calvin Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity* (1988; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988); Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999); David L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands?: Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Wright, 146–81.

<sup>38</sup> *Old Testament Ethics*, 254.

<sup>39</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 116–117.

- What kind of situation was this law trying to promote, or prevent?
- What interests was this law aiming to protect?
- Who would have benefited from this law and why?
- Whose power was this law trying to restrict and how did it do so?
- What rights and responsibilities were embodied in this law?
- What kind of behaviour did this law encourage or discourage?
- What vision of society motivated this law?
- What moral principles, values or priorities did this law embody or instantiate?
- What motivation did this law appeal to?
- What sanction or penalty (if any) was attached to this law, and what does that show regarding its relative seriousness or moral priority?<sup>40</sup>

### *Societal Justice in the United Monarchy Period*

Given the Pentateuch's emphasis on societal justice, one would expect the theme to be a significant concern in subsequent books. Joshua and Judges necessarily focus on the conquest and retention of the Promised Land, however. By definition the role of the judge (שֹׁפֵט) involved the determination and enforcement of מִשְׁפָּט (e.g., 4:4–5). Nevertheless, the text of Judges does not provide specific examples in this regard. What one does encounter are gross violations of Mosaic principles of justice (e.g., 19:22–30), even by those in leadership (e.g., 9:1–6).

The reader of Judges anticipates that societal justice will receive attention once the monarchy is established (cf. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Though Judge Samuel ministered with integrity (1 Sm 12:3–4), his sons “took bribes and perverted justice [מִשְׁפָּט]” (8:3). King Saul's persecution of David reflects another kind of perversion of justice (e.g., 18:9ff). By contrast, 2 Samuel 8:15 summarizes the early years of David's reign over all Israel in terms of doing “justice and equity [מִשְׁפָּט וִצְדָקָה] to all his people” (cf. 1 Chr 18:14). It is noteworthy that the narrative continues quickly with the stories of David's kindness/loyalty [חֶסֶד] to Mephibosheth (9:1) and his rebuffed effort to show חֶסֶד to Hanun the Ammonite (10:2). The linking of these stories suggests overlap between חֶסֶד and מִשְׁפָּט וִצְדָקָה.<sup>41</sup> Later, Absalom steals the Israelites' hearts by alleging that the older David is failing to render מִשְׁפָּט (15:1–6).

Upon commencing his reign Solomon prays: “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern [שֹׁפֵט; ‘judge,’ NASB] your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern [שֹׁפֵט] this your great people?” (1 Kgs 3:9). Verse 11 rephrases this request as “understanding to discern what is right [מִשְׁפָּט; ‘justice,’ NASB].” The granting of the request becomes evident to Israel in the king's handling of two prostitutes who both claim to be mothers of a

<sup>40</sup> *Old Testament Ethics*, 323.

<sup>41</sup> This connection is drawn from Richard G. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness during David's Reign: Rereading the Court History and Its Ethics according to 2 Samuel 18:15b–20:26*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 508 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 65–106, who builds on the work of Weinfeld. Smith's overall thesis is questionable, however: that the author of Samuel presents David as having failed at justice/righteousness from the beginning.

baby: “And all Israel heard of the judgment [מִשְׁפָּט] that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice [מִשְׁפָּט]” (v. 28), “to make judicial decisions” (NET).

This theme climaxes in 1 Kings 10 with the visit of the Queen of Sheba. After Solomon stuns her with his wisdom and the glories of his kingdom, the queen is breathless. Her exclamation culminates with this statement: “Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness [מִשְׁפָּט וצִדְקָה]” (v. 9). Some see here an ironic rebuke of Solomon, contending that the king was neglecting the concerns of his people while growing the luxuries of his court.<sup>42</sup> Without minimizing Solomon’s sins, others argue that in verses 23–25 the narrator presents Solomon’s wealth, wisdom, and worldwide fame in a positive light, as a fulfillment of God’s promise to make Solomon great (3:12–13).<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, 2 Chronicles 9:8 repeats the Queen of Sheba’s statement about מִשְׁפָּט וצִדְקָה, yet the Chronicler does not deal with Solomon’s apostasy. Whether one sees 1 Kings 10:9 as a commendation or a rebuke of Solomon, it still testifies to Israel’s potential for drawing the nations to Yahweh, in fulfillment of Genesis 18:19 and Deuteronomy 4:5–8. It also implies the broad applicability of the ideals that were to govern Israelite society.

Solomon’s wisdom overflowed in the production of the Wisdom Literature, and this literature contains substantial emphasis on societal justice. Some evidence from Job has already been noted above. Ecclesiastes decries oppression and extortion as realities that can make earthly life a crushing burden (3:16; 4:1–4; 5:8). Proverbs conveys instruction on what makes for a just society and just behavior in society. In fact, the book’s stated purposes include “instruction in wise dealing [Hiphil infinitive absolute of שָׁכַל], in righteousness [צִדְקָה], justice [מִשְׁפָּט], and equity [מִישָׁרִים]” (1:3; cf. 2:9). As adverbial accusatives of manner, the closing trio specifies what “wise dealing” looks like.<sup>44</sup> This construction precludes a sharp distinction between what is merely wise and what is just. Like the Torah, Proverbs roots an understanding of justice in a right relationship with Yahweh (28:5; cf. 1:7; 9:10). It also repeats the law’s insistence on righteous measurements (16:11) and its prohibition of partiality in judicial decisions (18:5; 22:22–23). Further, Proverbs anticipates the prophets in prioritizing justice over worship ritual (21:3). Justice should characterize all of God’s people (e.g., 12:5; 29:7), but Proverbs applies it especially to kings (e.g., 8:15–16; 29:4, 14). As in earlier OT books, one encounters a connection between justice terms and terms associated with benevolence: compare the similar statements in 16:12 (צִדְקָה), 29:4 (מִשְׁפָּט), and 20:28 (חֶסֶד and אֱמֶת).

Though Proverbs 31 may not go back to the Solomonic period, it is noted at this point for the sake of convenience. Here King Lemuel’s mother gives him some arresting counsel. She warns kings against intoxicating beverages, “lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights [דִּין] of all the afflicted” (v. 5). Conversely, rulers should use their power positively: “Open your mouth

<sup>42</sup> See Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 87; Wright, 273–74.

<sup>43</sup> See Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Kings: The Wisdom and the Folly*, FBC (Ross-shire, Great Britain, 2002), 103–104, citing Ronald S. Wallace, *Readings in 1 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 69.

<sup>44</sup> NET translator’s note; cf. GKC §118q.

for the mute, for the rights [דִּין] of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge [שפט] righteously [צדק], defend the rights [דִּין] of the poor and needy” (vv. 8–9; cf. 24:11–12). Waltke explains why such action is necessary: “The poor may be defenseless against them [the rich and powerful] because they are too ignorant to counteract the obstructionist tactics of the legally savvy, too inarticulate to state their case convincingly, too poor to produce proper evidence, and/or too lowly to command respect. Furthermore, the rich and powerful can bribe witnesses to accuse them falsely.”<sup>45</sup> Jewish legend holds that “Lemuel” is another name for Solomon, but it is just as possible that Lemuel is a Gentile ruler. Waltke thinks “he is probably a proselyte to Israel’s faith.”<sup>46</sup> If so, the inspired inclusion of his mother’s teaching in Proverbs demonstrates strong continuity between God’s ethic for Israel and his expectations for justice in the nations generally.

In any case, Solomon ultimately failed in his kingly duties, and his failure feeds the OT’s expectation for a king whose character and reign would be marked by perfect justice. Various kingship psalms point in this direction, and Psalm 72 is especially relevant. The superscription indicates that the psalm was written לְשִׁלְמֹה: either *by* or *for* Solomon. The passage is a prayer for the success of an Israelite king, as an outworking of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 17). Some of its expressions echo Solomon’s reign, particularly the references to Sheba (vv. 10, 15). Yet Solomon fell far short of satisfying the longings of this passage. Furthermore, some of those longings are inapplicable to a merely human king (e.g., v. 5). Thus, Psalm 72 anticipates the ultimate Davidic King.<sup>47</sup>

This text describes several features of the Messianic kingdom, but societal justice stands out most prominently.

Give the king your justice [משפט], O God,  
 and your righteousness [צדקה] to the royal son!  
 May he judge [דין] your people with righteousness [צדק],  
 and your poor with justice [משפט]!  
 Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,  
 and the hills, in righteousness [צדקה]!  
 May he defend the cause of [שפט] the poor of the people,  
 give deliverance to the children of the needy,  
 and crush the oppressor! . . .  
 For he delivers the needy when he calls,  
 the poor and him who has no helper.  
 He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
 and saves the lives of the needy.  
 From oppression and violence he redeems their life,  
 and precious is their blood in his sight. (vv. 1–4, 12–14)

This prayer reflects two facts that have been surfacing throughout the OT. First, the שפט terms and the צדק terms overlap considerably, and together they summarize the ideal of societal justice. Second,

<sup>45</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 509.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 503; cf. Peter A. Steveson, *A Commentary on Proverbs* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2001), 435.

<sup>47</sup> This view is standard among conservative commentators. See Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 273; Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms, Volume 2 (42–89)*, KEC (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 545–46.

this justice is multifaceted. It is not limited to accurate judicial pronouncements. It includes caring deeply for the oppressed and working aggressively to deliver them from injustice. Such is the society that believers love because such is the God who loves them and whom they love (cf. Ps 146:7–9).

### *Societal Justice in the Prophetic Period*

After Solomon's demise and the division of his kingdom, Yahweh eventually raises up a host of prophets to proclaim his Word to his people. The need for societal justice is one of their main burdens. The extensive prophetic material on the subject can be adequately summarized under three themes.

#### The Prophetic Rebuke of Israel

The negative element predominates, denouncing Israel for injustice and urging repentance. Amos is the *locus classicus* in this regard.<sup>48</sup> Addressing the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century B.C., he famously calls for מִשְׁפָּט to “roll down like waters” and צִדְקָה “like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). This demand comes because the people have done the unthinkable: “turned justice into poison / and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood” (6:12). Amos specifies what this means, detailing multiple violations of Mosaic legislation on justice. In chapter 5 he rebukes the nobility for excessively taxing the poor for personal gain as well as for accepting bribes in order to deny legal claims of the needy in court (vv. 11–15). Chapter 8 explains trampling on the needy (v. 4) in terms of false balances that produce illegitimate profits (v. 5), the purchasing of slaves, and the sale of chaff with wheat (v. 6). In describing such oppression, Amos uses graphic imagery such as the depiction of Samaria's wealthy women as cows (4:1).

Focusing on the Southern Kingdom around the same time, Micah's language is even more offensive. He depicts the leaders' oppression of the people in terms of cannibalism (3:1–3). It is no wonder that he dismisses their worship offerings, extravagant as they may be, and presses on them more fundamental concerns: doing מִשְׁפָּט, loving חֶסֶד, and walking humbly with God (6:8). Here Micah is not rejecting the worship practices required by the Mosaic law. Rather, societal injustice reflects a breakdown in the nation's relationship with God, and therefore worship ritual is meaningless and insulting. The “spiritual” and the societal are inseparable.<sup>49</sup>

Micah's contemporary Isaiah makes the same point. His opening salvo urges, “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; / remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; / cease to do

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<sup>48</sup> Amos's “basic theme was that Yahweh, Israel's great God, who had been so good to them in past generations, was going to send a devastating and final judgment upon them because of the sins which they had committed, sins involving social injustice and religious apostasy.” Stan Bushey, “The Theology of Amos,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 14 (1980): 62. Compare Robert D. Bell, *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2010), 393–403; David A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity, 1989), 111–19.

<sup>49</sup> For a similar explanation, see Hemchand Gossai, *Justice, Righteousness and the Social Critique of the Eighth-Century Prophets*, American University Studies, Series VII Theology Religion, vol. 141 (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 265–71.

evil, / learn to do good; / seek justice [מִשְׁפָּט], / correct oppression; bring justice [שֹׁפֵט] to the fatherless, / plead the widow's cause" (1:16–17). Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard exclaims that Yahweh "looked for justice [מִשְׁפָּט], but behold, bloodshed; / for righteousness [צְדִיקָה], but behold, an outcry [צַעֲקָה]!" (5:7). The next verse denounces the greedy acquisition of land in violation of the Year of Jubilee laws. According to 10:1–2, Judah's leaders not only oppressed the needy but also crafted laws that facilitated oppression. Isaiah 58:6–7 links justice with both fasting and compassion. "Is not this the fast that I choose: / to loose the bonds of wickedness, / to undo the straps of the yoke, / to let the oppressed go free, / and to break every yoke? / Is it not to share your bread with the hungry / and bring the homeless poor into your house; / when you see the naked, to cover him, / and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (cf. vv. 9–10).

As God's people move into exile, the prophets spotlight societal injustice as a main reason for judgment. Jeremiah grieves that Judah's legal system is perverted against the vulnerable (e.g., 5:28; 7:5–6; 21:12; 22:3). So does Ezekiel (e.g., 7:23–27; 22:29; 45:9), upholding just treatment of fellow men as an obligation of Israel's relationship to Yahweh (chapters 18 and 33). True knowledge of Yahweh includes knowing what he delights to do: חֶסֶד, מִשְׁפָּט, and צְדִיקָה (Jer 9:24). The inevitable effect becomes clear in one of the OT's most incisive statements about societal justice. Jeremiah 22 teaches that what a king does with his influence reflects his spiritual condition. Rebuking Jehoiakim by describing Josiah, Yahweh says, "Do you think you are a king / because you compete in cedar? / Did not your father eat and drink / and do justice and righteousness [מִשְׁפָּט וְצְדִיקָה]? / Then it was well with him. / He judged [דִּין] the cause of the poor and needy; / then it was well. / *Is not this to know me?*" (vv. 15–16, emphasis added). Sadly, however, injustice plagued Israel even in the post-exilic period (see Neh 5:1–19). Thus, to the very end the OT continues calling Yahweh's people to מִשְׁפָּט. Zechariah echoes his predecessors in telling them to protect and provide for the needy instead of worrying about details regarding fasting (7:9–10; 8:16–17).

### The Prophetic Rebuke of Non-Israelite Nations

The Hebrew prophets also address the sins of non-Israelite nations. Anticipating the final destruction of the world, Isaiah declares: "The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant" (24:5). This statement refers to the moral requirements incumbent upon human beings as creations of God, requirements known at least through conscience (cf. Rom 2:12–16). But "the everlasting covenant" may refer specifically to the Noachian Covenant and its associated prohibition of murder (Gen 9:1–17).<sup>50</sup> In any case, Israel's prophets assume that Gentiles are bound to certain divine expectations for societal life. For example, in response to Jonah's preaching the king of Nineveh tells everyone in the city to turn

<sup>50</sup> Compare J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 199; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 446; Peter A. Steveson, *A Commentary on Isaiah* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2003), 196–97; Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes, Volume II: Chapters 19 to 39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 155–58.



specifically from “the violence that is in his hands” (Jon 3:8).<sup>51</sup> Daniel ends his prediction of Nebuchadnezzar’s beastly punishment this way: “Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness [Aram. צִדְקָה], and your iniquities by showing mercy [Aram. חֲנּוּן] to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity” (4:27). Wood provides a reasonable explanation of the background: “Nebuchadnezzar was a noted builder. Often kings showed little consideration to those who did the work on building projects, with hundreds dying of extreme heat and difficult conditions. Nebuchadnezzar was probably guilty of this lack of concern. In his pride, he may also have taken little notice of injustices meted out by judges and other officials as well as by the rich in his kingdom. Daniel’s counsel was that all this should be corrected.”<sup>52</sup> Whatever the details, Nebuchadnezzar has violated fixed requirements for the treatment of fellow human beings. So had Sodom of old: “Behold, this was the guilt of your [Jerusalem’s] sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (Ez 16:49). God expected the Sodomites to use their abundant resources to help people in need.

Through multiple prophetic oracles, Yahweh holds the nations of the ANE accountable for violating his will regarding societal justice. The severe judgments announced in the oracles against the nations indicate the gravity of these standards. Compiling the data from Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Nahum, one finds nine non-Israelite entities targeted: Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Damascus/Syria, Egypt, Edom, Tyre, Ammon, and Nineveh/Assyria.<sup>53</sup> Whether the oracles were delivered to the nations or were spoken only to Israel/Judah by way of promising deliverance and vindication, they send a forceful message that God will not tolerate injustice in the world forever.<sup>54</sup>

Especially potent are Amos’s oracles regarding Israel’s neighbors (1:3–2:3). The prophet uses these oracles and the one against Judah (2:4–5) as a rhetorical technique to constrain the Northern Kingdom to see the rightness of Yahweh’s judgment against it (2:6ff). Nevertheless, each of Amos’s

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<sup>51</sup> “Violence [חֲמָסָה], the arbitrary infringements of human rights, is a term that occurs in the OT prophets especially in connection with cities: urban conglomeration encourages scrambling above others, like caterpillars in a jar [Jer 6:7; Ez 7:23; Am 3:10; Mi 6:12]. Although the tale [!] deals with moral misbehavior in an Assyrian city, the listeners would recall that Assyria’s aggressive violence toward other nations was condemned by the prophets as a national characteristic [e.g., Na 3:1], and so by association it has special point.” Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 225.

<sup>52</sup> Leon J. Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (1973; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 117–18.

<sup>53</sup> See the chart in John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill, *Old Testament Today: A Journey from Original Meaning to Contemporary Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 258.

<sup>54</sup> Walton and Hill provide a helpful analogy (263): “The Old Testament theology concerning the way God treats nations can be illustrated if we use the example of an old-fashioned balance scale with trays connected to either end of a rocker beam balanced on its center point. If we envision such a scale for God’s handling of sin in the temporal-material frame, we will have a cogent picture of Israel’s general theology. One tray represents evil, the other side, good. As a nation did that which was right, weights would be placed on the ‘good’ tray. As a nation did that which was sinful or wrong, weights would be placed on the ‘evil’ tray. One additional feature of this system is that under the evil tray is a button that sounds an alarm. The idea is that when evil sufficiently outweighs good, the alarm sounds and God prepares to carry out judgment.” Walton and Hill clarify that the oracles against the nations present God’s way of determining the earthly destiny of nations not his way of determining the eternal destiny of individuals.

brief oracles against the nations stands as a message in its own right. He first addresses entirely foreign nations: Damascus/Syria (1:3–5), Philistia (1:6–8), and Tyre (1:9–10). Then he narrows down to peoples related to Israel because they descended from Abraham and Isaac (Edom, 1:11–12) or Abraham’s father Terah (Ammon, 1:13–15; Moab, 2:1–3).

Amos’s oracles against the nations center on three categories of sins. Though he does not decry them with **שפט/צדק** terminology, these sins obviously violate God’s expectations for justice in society. The nature of these sins is clear even though scholars debate the specific historical events Amos describes. In general, the nations are guilty of *cruelty* toward their enemies. Damascus, for example, “threshed Gilead [the region of the Transjordanian Israelite tribes] with threshing sledges of iron” (1:3). The language here refers to a threshing board with sharp objects underneath.<sup>55</sup> Even if Amos is speaking metaphorically, he is describing abusiveness in the extreme. As a further example, the Philistines “carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom” (1:6). This refers to an invasion of some village or community in order to sell its inhabitants as slaves. “Removal by kidnapping for the sole purpose of resale is contrary to even the lowest sense of morality.”<sup>56</sup>

Next, the nations’ cruelty is particularly reprehensible when it involves *violation of expected brotherliness*. The Tyrians also “delivered up a whole people to Edom,” but additionally they “did not remember the covenant of brotherhood” (1:9). That is, they breached a previously made treaty.<sup>57</sup> Next comes the sin of Edom: “He pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever” (1:11). These statements could be describing treaty-breaking like Tyre’s, but the expression *his brother* more likely indicates the Edomites’ egotistical disregard for their physical kinship with Judah (cf. the Book of Obadiah).<sup>58</sup>

The nations’ sins reach their nadir in the last two of Amos’s oracles, which focus on *utter disrespect for human life and dignity*. The Ammonites “ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border” (1:13). They valued land more than life. Moab “burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom” (2:1). The Moabites so wanted to degrade Edom that they evidently desecrated the tomb of one of its kings, exhumed his remains, and thoroughly incinerated them. Amos considers this entirely unacceptable even though he had earlier denounced Edom for its own abuses.

Amos censures the nations in other ways. He introduces each of his oracles with the expression *for three transgressions . . . and for four* (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1; cf. 2:4, 6). This formula does not necessarily mean that a specific number of sins will be enumerated. Scholars have suggested various ways for understanding the numbers here,<sup>59</sup> but ultimately the point is that the sin has exceeded the limit of divine toleration. The expression emphasizes that God has been exceedingly patient and is entirely justified in his punishment of the nations. Also significant is the term translated *transgressions*,

<sup>55</sup> See Jeff Niehaus, “Amos,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 1:341.

<sup>56</sup> Gary V. Smith, *Amos*, Mentor Commentaries (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 1998), 81.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 85–86.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 87–89.

<sup>59</sup> For instance, “three—no, four,” implying compounded sins, or “three plus four,” equaling seven, a number symbolizing completeness. Compare Niehaus, 340, with Smith, 69–70.

פָּשַׁע. The root has to do with “a breach of relationships.”<sup>60</sup> It describes breaches in various kinds of relationships such as the relationship between family members (Gn 50:17), between fellow citizens (Ex 22:9), between people and their rulers (1 Kgs 12:19), and between Israel and Yahweh (Is 1:2). As seen in the last two examples, depending on the kind of relationship פָּשַׁע can refer to rebellion or revolt. Amos’s use of פָּשַׁע for the nations’ sins implies a relationship between the nations and God as their sovereign or between the nations and fellow human beings.

Whichever relationship is in view, Amos assumes that God has international expectations for justice. These requirements cannot be tied strictly to the fact that the nations had oppressed God’s covenant people, since the sins identified were committed against both Israelites and non-Israelites. To borrow Hammershaimb’s words, Amos is describing “breaches of a universally valid moral law.”<sup>61</sup> The oracles’ assumed requirements are largely negative in nature (e.g., cruelty is disallowed). As with Isaiah 24:5, some commentators connect these to the humanity-wide prohibition of murder in Genesis 9:6.<sup>62</sup> But Amos also assumes at least one positive expectation: nations ought to be honest and abide by treaties they make (1:9).

Whether negative or positive, Amos’s requirements transcend cultural and covenantal variations and convey divine standards for justice in society throughout the world. This represents a complement to the important distinction between Israel and the church. One must not entirely equate the collection of documents known as “the Old Testament” with the arrangement Yahweh made with Israel known as “the Old Covenant.” The Old Testament is broader than the Old Covenant, and it contains authoritative instruction for humanity at large—including instruction on societal justice.

### The Prophetic Anticipation of God’s Kingdom on Earth

In contrast to Israelite and Gentile injustice, the Prophetic Books join with passages such as Psalm 72 in anticipating complete justice in the world through God’s ultimate Anointed King. Hosea points in this direction in an early prediction of the New Covenant (2:19–20). But Isaiah in particular feeds the hope for a just society. Chapter 9’s beloved promise says that the climactic Davidic kingdom will be established and upheld “with justice [מִשְׁפָּט] and with righteousness [צְדִיקָה]” forever (v. 7; cf. 16:5). Those who patiently wait for this are declared blessed (30:18). Isaiah 42 announces not only that the Servant the Lord will bring מִשְׁפָּט to the nations but also that—unlike so many past rulers—he will deal tenderly with the weak (vv. 1–4). In the future kingdom Yahweh’s מִשְׁפָּט will function as a light to guide the nations (51:4–5). Based on all the foregoing, one may conclude that God receives a measure of glory when the same light guides the nations today even partially. Furthermore, if believers yearn for societal justice in the future Messianic age, does it not stand to reason that they will

<sup>60</sup> G. Herbert Livingston, “פָּשַׁע (*pāsha*) ‘rebel, transgress, revolt,’” *TWOT*, 2:741. R. Knierim argues for פָּשַׁע as fundamentally a legal term meaning “crime.” This definition would only strengthen the point being made above. See “פָּשַׁע *peša* ‘crime,’” *TLOT*, 2:1033–37.

<sup>61</sup> Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*, trans. John Sturdy (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), 22. More broadly on this point, see John Barton, *Amos’s Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3–2.5*, The Society for Old Testament Study Monograph Series 6 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Niehaus, 340.

pursue such justice to whatever degree possible in this age? As Abernethy writes, “Since God ‘love[s] justice’ (61:8) and even enters the fray because he is so appalled by the injustice in this world (59:15), it is fitting for his servants to advocate for the vulnerable, set captives free and provide for those in need. The people should be like their king, for they are beneficiaries of God’s own justice and righteousness.”<sup>63</sup>

### Conclusion

The present study has traced the theme of societal justice throughout the OT, particularly as reflected in the key terms **מִשְׁפָּט** and **צִדְקָה**. It has shown that Yahweh expected Israel not to oppress others and to uphold fairness in the courts. More actively, the Israelites were to rescue those in their midst who were suffering oppression. More actively still, the justice of the theocracy was linked with humanitarianism, making material provision for the destitute in the covenant community. Finally, God’s will for Israel’s society reflected patterns expected of nations the world over. The OT reveals elements that God loves and hates in human society at large.

On the other hand, this article has not proposed specific laws or policies that modern nations should adopt. Nor has it called the institutional church to participate in societal or political enterprises. Resolving such matters requires more than the OT. Major NT factors to consider include the mission of the church as well as the Christian’s relationship to the state.

What the OT does, however, is to provide substantial teaching for developing an ethic and vision for societal life. This revelation constitutes a core element of the biblical benchmark for assessing contemporary notions of “social justice.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps just as importantly, it will help the believer not to minimize his responsibilities in overreaction to unbiblical perspectives on the subject. The OT material ought to shape the conscience, affections, and objectives of the Christian. It directs him as to the kind of person he should become, the kind of behavior that should characterize his life, the kinds of relationships he should cultivate, and the kinds of socio-political strategies and tactics he should use his influence to promote—all by the enabling grace of the gospel. Ultimately, the OT displays the character of the God who has created and redeemed the believer. Worshiping this God and reflecting him in the world becomes the goal of the disciple of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>63</sup> Andrew T. Abernethy, *The Book of Isaiah and God’s Kingdom: A Thematic-Theological Approach*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016), 190–91.

<sup>64</sup> The present study has opted for the expression *societal justice* due to the problematic associations of “social justice.” For an entry point to the discussion, including bibliography, see <https://shenviapologetics.com/intro-to-critical-theory/>. Helpful works from a Christian perspective include Scott Allen, *Why Social Justice Is Not Biblical Justice: An Urgent Appeal to Fellow Christians in a Time of Social Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Credo House, 2020); Mike Moses, “Privilege, Oppression, and the Gospel: A Biblical Response to Intersectionality,” *Presbyterion* 45, vol. 1 (2019): 128–52; Thaddeus J. Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising: 12 Questions Christians Should Ask about Social Justice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020). See also Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020); Noah Rothman, *Unjust: Social Justice and the Unmaking of America* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2019).