

## Theological Constants of Justice in the Old Testament<sup>1</sup>

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Justice dwells in the consciousness of the Israelites and for them is a way of life. While there is no exact Hebrew word for justice, in their Scriptures, it is always linked to relationship.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, there are two key Hebrew terms that convey justice. These are *sedakah* and *mishpath*.

*Sedakah*<sup>3</sup> means right relationship. In the Old Testament this right relationship is demonstrated by God in his relationship with Israel and with all things he has made, and by Israel, in her response of obedience, reverence and faithfulness to God. Furthermore, "the right relationship that God established demonstrates the way of justice for human beings in dealing with one another."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the research project undertaken by the Team on *Contextualizing the Theological Constants of Justice* under the direction of Prof. José M. de Mesa, Ph.D.

<sup>2</sup> Elsbernd, Mary & Reimund Bieringer, *When Love is not Enough* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, B. "sadaq," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (hereinafter referred to as TDOT), Vol. XII, 239-258. *Sedeq* and *sedaqa* are often used synonymously. However, while *sedeq* evokes the notion of correctness and order, *sedaqa* emphasizes action and activity rather than condition (TDOT, Vol. XII, 256-257).

<sup>4</sup> Polan, Gregory J. "Justice," *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 510.

The word *sedakah* also corresponds to Yahweh's righteousness. Yahweh shows his righteousness by keeping the covenant and being the very source of righteousness (Ps. 111: 3, 5, 9). Some words related to Yahweh's *sedakah* are "mercy, compassion, and salvation". It is identical with deliverance and salvation, describing it as associated to a norm established by God. It also refers to the ordered relationship with nature (Ps. 85: 11-12), in God's dealings with human beings (Neh. 9:33; Ps. 40:11), between David and God (1 K. 3:6), between the king and the people (Isa. 11:5) and among people generally.

On the other hand, *mishpath*<sup>5</sup> illustrates the forensic nature of justice. It is justice on the context of the failure of the right relationship. This is where God refuses injustice because the right relationship is being desecrated. It is also a court of law wherein the accused is punished and the victim is vindicated. God is a (king) judge who punishes the wicked one and rewards the righteous one, that is, he rights wrongs in order to restore right relationships. God does not punish just to punish. The arbiter, the King-God, secures order in the community by implementing the *mishpath*. It carries a tone of legal claims or judgment emerging from the Torah. It also implies deliverance for those who are just and innocent, but negative for the wicked and sinful. Yahweh will interfere in Egypt with powerful acts of judgment (Ex. 6: 6; 7: 4). When God's punishment strikes the enemy, it means salvation and deliverance for the innocents and oppressed. But God is not simply a punisher of the wicked. The Prophets and the Psalms show God as forgiving and compassionate to the sinner, and whose anger is not endless: "Return, faithless Israel, says the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the Lord; I will not be angry for ever" (Jer. 3: 12); "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103: 8-10). Based on *sedakah* as righteousness (wherein God judges the wrongdoer and vindicates the innocent) and *mishpath* as

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, B. "*mišpat*" *TDOT*, Vol. IX, 86-88.

a verdict or decision, Yahweh is revealed as the one who initiates righteousness and acts as the highest judge. He is the definitive ruler who maintains relationship with His vassals.

### **Our Specific Understanding of God as Norm: God as King**

Yahweh is seen in the Old Testament as the source of *sedakah* and the one who executes *mishpath* because He is the creator, Lord of the Covenant,<sup>6</sup> and the king.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars have maintained that the later idea of Yahweh as king could have originated from the influence of the ancient Near Eastern mythologies on the consciousness of the Israelites by way of Canaanite culture and their own experience of the monarchy.<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew term *melek* is the expression that God is the sovereign king.<sup>9</sup> Yahweh, the king, entered into relationship with the Israelites through creation (Is 45:11-13, 18-19). God is the cosmic ruler (Ps. 93:1-2) and manifested His salvific power when He liberated His people from slavery in the exodus from Egypt (Ex. 13:17-15:21). He is an authoritative ruler who formed Israel as a nation. Yahweh is truly the creator and king of the whole world. As “king of the nations” (Jer. 10:7), His kingship was authority over all, cele-

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<sup>6</sup> The OT covenant is patterned over the suzerainty or vassal treaty. Refer to Boadt, Lawrence, *Reading the Old Testament*, (New York: Paulist Press: 1984), 176-181. This is not a covenant of equals because “Yahweh is the superior and Israel the inferior. Consequently, Yahweh is the one who commands, while Israel is the one who is expected to obey.” *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, (Makati City: St Pauls, 1994), 99. Nevertheless, each of the covenant parties has corresponding obligations to fulfill.

<sup>7</sup> De Mesa, Jose M. & Lode Wostyn, *Doing Christology* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1989), 144.

<sup>8</sup> It is good to remember that there existed two currents in Israel’s acceptance of the monarchy. Moreover, several of the writers (especially the Deuteronomistic writers) would judge a king depending on their adherence to the Covenant. They see the fall of both the Northern and Southern kingdoms as a result of the kings not being “righteous” in accordance with Yahweh their King (cf. *Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 638-641).

<sup>9</sup> Senior, Donald, “Reign of God,” *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Pasay City: Daughters of St. Paul, 1991), 851-861.

brated in worship and proclaimed as ascending His throne in the Psalms (Ps. 47, 93, 96, 99). Psalm 93:1-2, for example, declares Yahweh as creator and cosmic king: "The Lord is king, He is robed in majesty, He is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved; your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting." He is the lord who protects His people: "He will send from heaven and save me, He will put to shame those who trample on me. God will send forth his steadfast love and his faithfulness" (Ps 57:3). As king, Yahweh is the source of righteousness and truth. Hence, He is the model and norm of doing justice to others. The covenantal relationship that He established with His people demands obligations and duties to carry out justice. Having been justified by God, people are to show mercy and extend justice to others.

### **Action Involved on God's Part: Divine Kingship as Gift**

Yahweh is the creator and the sovereign king of all nations. He created the entire universe out of love for His people, liberated them from slavery through His mercy, and established Israel as a nation out of concern for His people. In the Exodus, the gifts of the covenant and the Law are manifestations of divine justice. "As the Initiator of the covenant, God provided for the well-being and safety of the people of Israel (Ex. 19:3-6; 20:2). Israel's response needed to be faithful adherence to the commandments and laws (Ex. 19:5; 20:1-17) which were given to them."<sup>10</sup> Hence, all the mighty deeds of the cosmic king are gifts to His people. As the most powerful king, Yahweh does not expect anything in return but wants order and restoration for His people by way of righteousness. God established a covenantal relationship with His people in order to guarantee *shalom*, i.e., over-all harmony (Ex. 12: 21-28). This he will accomplish even though Israel has been unfaithful to the Covenant. "God's gift of justice to Israel is an act of re-creation, a return to the state of paradise where justice once reigned" (Hos. 2:20-22).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Collegetown Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 510.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

## On the part of human beings: The pursuit of divine law by living out the Torah

In the Old Testament *sedakah* involves the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship either with God or with other human beings. This relationship often has the covenant of Yahweh in view (e.g., Is. 51:7; Ez. 18:19,21). When a person fulfills the obligation of a relationship, that person is righteous (*sedek*).<sup>12</sup> The Israelites manifest their allegiance to Yahweh by being loyal and obedient to the law of the sovereign ruler. Furthermore, they are aware that they will experience peace, prosperity and abundance through obedience to the will of the king. (cf. Lev. 19:18; Dt.6:1-5) God's people show fidelity to him by showing concern to one another by concrete acts of righteousness: "moderation, goodness, and strength" (4 Macc. 2:23).

Prior to the exile, righteousness in the light of the covenant was seen more in terms of the whole nation of Israel (Jer. 31:28, cf. 20:22-23). Later, however, there is more concern with righteousness of the devout individual before God (Ez. 18:2, 5-9, 23-29). "The covenant relationship especially assumed the king was responsible for maintaining righteousness in Israel (Ps. 72:1-7)."<sup>13</sup>

The context of the Old Testament shows us a culture of inequality. Slavery even existed during that time. Nevertheless, God still showed mercy and love to the oppressed and commanded the people of Israel to do the same.<sup>14</sup> Yahweh's challenge for the Israelites is to treat others as their brothers and sisters. Another demand of Yahweh is for them to be loyal to the relational covenant for the sake of realizing shalom.

## Fidelity to the Norm: From Faithlessness to Faithfulness

Israel continued to be hard-hearted and failed to abide by the Law and the Covenant. God sends the prophets to serve as

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<sup>12</sup> Kelly, R.A. "Righteousness," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. IV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 193.

<sup>13</sup> *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 1129.

<sup>14</sup> Dt. 6:1-5.

the “social conscience” of Israel. The prophets had a two-fold role: to denounce injustices and to announce justice. The double message of denunciation-annunciation can be summed up as a “Return to the Covenant.”<sup>15</sup>

The kingdom of Yahweh demands concrete acts of righteousness: sharing bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, rescuing the needy (Is. 58:6-7). Yahweh is the Holy One of Israel who reminds her to be faithful to the Covenant. True religion is not about festivals or sacrifices but of doing justice to the poor and the outcasts (Is. 1:11-17; Am. 5:21-24). God calls out to His people to “cease to do evil and learn to do good” (Is. 1:16-17); in a word, from a life of faithlessness to a life of faithfulness.<sup>16</sup> To do justice is to turn away from evil and to remain faithful to the Covenant. This is what conversion is all about. It is faithfulness that calls for a change of heart: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances” (Ez. 36:26-27).

### Priority of Love: *Hesed*

Another Hebrew term essentially linked to justice is *hesed*<sup>17</sup> which is often translated as loving kindness.<sup>18</sup> Other translations

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<sup>15</sup> Gorospe, Vitaliano, *Forming the Filipino Social Conscience* (Makati City: Bookmark, 1997), 106.

<sup>16</sup> *Emeth* is another Hebrew term essentially associated with justice. It means “truth” and “faithfulness” (*TDOT* Vol. I, 310). In Psalm 31:5 Yahweh is shown as a “faithful God.” *Emeth* is the conduct of Yahweh toward His people. In Ps. 146:6 Yahweh is depicted as the creator who keeps *emeth* (trustworthy because He is faithful) and man can rely on Him forever (*TDOT*, Vol. I, 313).

<sup>17</sup> For example, “In Mic. 6:8 *mispath* and *hesed* appear in parallel in the statement of what God requires of mankind.” D. Green, art. “hesed,” *TDOT*, Vol. IX (1986), 49.

<sup>18</sup> Elsbernd & Bieringer, *When Love is not Enough*, 46. According to *TDOT*, “the most appropriate translation of *hesed* is “goodness,” “grace,” or “kindness” D. Green, art. “hesed,” *TDOT* 9 (1986), 51.

would be steadfast love, mercy and compassion.<sup>19</sup> *Hesed* is the manifestation of love in the kingdom of Yahweh. Yahweh's *hesed* is expressed in his everlasting love for Israel (Ps. 25:6, Jer. 31:3), remaining faithful despite Israel's unfaithfulness (Hos. 2) and showing compassion and mercy for her sins (Isa. 54:8). His *hesed* is likewise manifested in the act of redeeming Israel from slavery and bringing her into the Promised Land (Ex. 15:13) and in the choice of David and Solomon as king over Israel (2Ch. 1:8). Yahweh, therefore, is the epitome of *hesed* and reminds the Israelites to remember His act of *hesed*: "Our ancestors, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wonderful works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love [*hesed*], but rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea" (Ps. 106:7). Yahweh's *hesed* is the standard and example of actualizing *hesed* to others.

Since Yahweh's *hesed* is the norm of human *hesed*, His people are to extend the same to others. The following are the concrete examples of *hesed*: to be generous to the needy (Dt. 15: 7-8); not to cheat the poor (Is. 10:2); to protect the widows, orphans, (Dt. 24: 20) and strangers (Dt. 24: 17); to respect the wage earners (Dt. 24: 15); to set the slaves and servants free on the seventh year (Dt. 15: 12-14), not to lend at an interest (Dt. 23:19) and not to give bribes to judges and other officials (Dt. 16: 18-19). The texts above manifest the social and relational nature of *hesed*, i.e., the key to secure justice in the context of Israel is by doing *hesed*.

Justice is doable through *mishphat*, *sedakah*, *emeth* and *hesed*. A person is just and righteous when he carries out faithfulness and steadfast love. These four components of justice are Yahweh's demands for the Israelites for them to realize right relationship. A combination of two or three of these words means justice for the poor, marginalized and oppressed.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the core message of the prophets lies on the inevitability of these four components of justice:

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<sup>19</sup> Abesamis, Carlos, *A Third Look at Jesus* (Claretian Publications, 1999), 147.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

“But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.” (Hosea 12: 6).

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

Then a throne shall be established in steadfast love in the tent of David, and on it shall sit in faithfulness a ruler who seeks justice and is swift to do what is right.” (Isaiah 16:5)

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another.” (Zechariah 7:9)

“But let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for these things I delight, says the Lord.” (Jer. 9:24) □