

**SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE BIBLE**  
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Three Hebrew terms are relevant to a discussion of social justice in the Bible: *tsedeq/tsedaqah*, *mishpat* and *hesed*.<sup>1</sup> The three are closely related, and in fact tend towards, and can be subsumed under, the New Testament term “love,” which defines the standard of “justice” to which Christians must aspire. The equivalent Greek terms for the three Hebrew terms are *dikaiosýne*, *krísis* and *éleos*. For our purposes here, we can translate these terms as “righteousness,” “social justice” and “compassionate loving kindness.”

***Tsedeq/tsedaqah***. These are the Hebrew terms for “righteousness;” attempts to distinguish between these (respectively) masculine and feminine forms are not generally accepted. G. von Rad calls them “life’s supreme value, upon which all life is based when it is in order” (cf. Augustine’s definition of peace, “the tranquility of order”), but notes that it is “completely different from our notion of “justice.” The term derives from the legal forum, where an unjustly accused person would seek to be “justified,” declared “righteous,” i.e., absolved or acquitted. In Israel, there were no abstract judgments; everything is in relation to community (cf. Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*). The “just” or righteous person meets the specific demands of a situation. A paradigm is St. Joseph (Matt 1:19); being a *dikaios* (Greek for *tsaddiq*), he seeks a merciful solution to his predicament over Mary’s pregnancy. *Tsedaqah* in fact tends toward *shalom* (“peace”, but really only in the Augustinian sense of wrongs made right, etc.) and *hesed*; it can be synonymous with salvation and vindication (Isa 54:17; 56:1; 62:1-2; 63:1). Being made or declared righteous (“justified”) is what the good person hopes for (Abraham, Gen 15:6; Rom 4).

*Tsedaqah* is a condition (or “sphere”) whose source is God which empowers for action beyond the natural capacity. It is this gift aspect which is reflected in the very important text Rom 3:21-26: God shows *his* righteousness by making *us* righteous! This is “justification,” what the “Suffering Servant” did for the undeserving others (1 Pet 2:24). Here there is an analogy to the effect of God’s Spirit (von Rad speaks of it as an “energy field”). See Heb 11:33. Samson (Judg 14:6) can tear a lion apart when the Spirit rushes upon him; in 15:14, he breaks free of his fetters. Already in the Torah, Deut 9:4-6, God’s gifts are not due to Israel’s righteousness, but to God’s free promise (*diathéke*); see Dan 9:18.

*Tsedaqah* thus can consist of unusual, unexpected acts. This characterizes God in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> In the OT, Tamar, dressing as a prostitute to obtain descendants for her dead husband, and thus fooling Judah into doing his duty, is said by him to be more *tsadaqah* than him for this act (Gen 38:26). This use of the term is close to *hesed*. Another prostitute’s violation of her community’s expectations and interests resulted in Biblical praise: Rahab tells the spies to reciprocate her *hesed* in helping them destroy her city (Jericho) with their own *hesed* once the city is taken (Joshua 2:11-14). James 2:25 and

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the background for this presentation came from consultation of E. JENNI-C. WESTERMANN, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Three typical examples of God’s extravagance (or that of his kingdom): he is the crazy sower who scatters seed where it will not grow (Mark 4:3-8); he is the dignified Oriental patriarch who runs out to greet his dissolute son (Luke 15:11-32); he is the businessman who renders topsy-turvy normal expectations (Matt 19:30-20:16); cf. 2 Cor 8:13-15.

Heb 11:31 praise Rahab, and she is included in Jesus' genealogy in Matt (1:5) along with Tamar (v. 3) and Ruth, who was also known for her *hesed* (Ruth 3:10).<sup>3</sup> This is the sense of *éleos* in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:37 and of *dikaíosýne* in Matt 6:33, the eschatological ethic of the Kingdom; cf. 5:20. (This is also the meaning of 1 John 2:29; 3:7).

*Mishpat* is the classic Hebrew term for what we would call "social justice," although it has numerous other meanings, including "decrees," "lawsuit" and even "right religion," (this is how Mowinckel would translate it in the "First Servant Song," Isa 42:1-4). The noun comes from the verb *shaphat*, "to judge," and in fact one of the king's principal duties was to render justice to the poor (see Psa 72, which closes Book II of the Psalter and was applied to the eschatologically-awaited Messiah). The concept of *mishpat* appears in prophetic texts too numerous to list. We cite some important ones: Isa 5:7-9 + 10:1-4; Amos 5:7, 10-12; 5:24 was famously cited by Martin Luther King; Micah 3:9-12; 6:8; Jer 7:5-11. What is denounced in these texts can be summarized as follows: 1) Yahweh expects justice, but there is violence instead; he expects righteousness, but instead the poor cry out. Many are left homeless while others accumulate luxurious houses (debtor-creditor relations; cf. the case of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kgs 21:1-16). 2) The administration of justice is crooked; judicial and other leaders are for hire; the holy city is being expanded by bloodshed. 3) There is false confidence in religion, whereas God really requires a humble heart and just behavior. The poor and the defenseless are specially mentioned as objects of God's concern. We can discuss these texts, other texts and their application in the discussion period. See esp. the Lenten text Isa 58:1-11.

*Mishpat* is usually translated *krísis* in the LXX (see Matt 12:18, 20, citing Isa 42; Acts 8:33, citing Isa 53), a word which is used for the Last Judgment in the New Testament: Heb 9:27; as final punishment in John 5:29; as vindication in 2 Thess 1:5. Its social justice meaning is retained in Matt 23:23.

*Hesed* is a word of unknown etymology whose root is found only in Hebrew and Aramaic. It became a religious term, often translated as *éleos*, "mercy," in the LXX. It refers to God's main characteristic, sometimes translated "love;" see the connection in Jer 31:3. In Psa 69:17, God's qualities of "goodness," *hesed* and maternal compassion are found together (see Pss 100:5; 106:1; 118).<sup>4</sup> A common *hendiadys* (two things standing for a totality) is God's *hesed and emet* (faithfulness, trustworthiness, reliability, "truth").<sup>5</sup> This is what John's prologue (1:14, 17) says that Jesus reveals about God (*cháris kai alétheia*; see LXX Psa 84:11; Esther 2:9, 17 translates *hesed* with *charis*, though *charis* is usually what translates *hen*, "favor," see Luke 1:30).

This quality is more important than religious acts; Matt 9:13; 12:7, quoting Hosea. It characterizes the "wisdom from above" in James 3:17, in an important text on community relations. It is experienced as undeserved from God, Gen 32:11. It connotes something extraordinary that exceeds the reciprocal (like going the extra mile). It is so unexpected it can bring problems; see 2 Sam 10:1-5. It describes Sarah's going way beyond a wife's duty, Gen 20:13 (though here Abraham seems to impose it!). Its opposite is what describes the cruel man, Prov 11:17, but many more call themselves *hasid* than are really faithful or trustworthy, 20:6.

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<sup>3</sup> These women were already associated in the Jewish tradition; see Y. ZAKOWITCH, "Rahab als Mutter des Boas in der Jesus-Genealogie (Matt. I 5)," *NT XVII* (1975), fasc. I, 1-5.

<sup>4</sup> In Jer 16:5, God takes away his *shalom*, maternal compassion and *hesed*, resulting in death.

<sup>5</sup> The emphasis on God's covenant love, due to N. Glueck's influential book, *Das Wort hesed usw.* (1927; English *Hesed in the Bible*, 1967) is too narrow. Cf. Luke 1:72.

**Conclusion.** In Luke 10:25-37, a lawyer (*nómikos*) questions Jesus about what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus asks him what the Law requires, and the man answers with the two great commandments, love of God and neighbor. But still, wanting to justify himself (i.e., to be righteous?), the lawyer asks Jesus who his neighbor is. Jesus then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, the story of a man who broke all the expectations of his culture when he responded to an “enemy” in need. This is the one who “did *hesed*” and thus was “justified,” like Abraham, the father of our faith and God’s friend Isa 41:8; James 2:23.

### **Legislation Illustrative of the Spirit of Social Justice in the Bible**

1. Don’t charge a fellow Israelite who is poor and lives among you interest, Exod 22:24; Deut 23:20; you can charge the foreigner interest, v. 21; Sabbatical years and helping the poor, Deut 15:1-11.
2. Return an outer garment taken in pledge from your neighbor before nightfall, so that he may cover himself to sleep, Exod 22:25-26 (if he is poor, Deut 24:12); see the irony in Amos 2:8.
3. Treat the resident alien well, Exod 22:20; remember you were resident aliens yourselves; don’t oppress the resident alien, 23:9. Let the alien enjoy his Sabbath rest, Exod 20:10, Deut 5:14.
4. Let the poor of your people eat from the fallow land, Exod 23:11; you can eat all the grapes you want from your neighbor’s vineyard, just don’t collect them in your sack, Deut 23:25; you can pluck grains from your neighbor’s land, v. 26, but don’t use a sickle. Don’t harvest every last bit of your fields or vineyards, so that the poor and resident aliens may gather something for themselves, Lev 19:9-10.
5. Don’t take a millstone (indispensable equipment for one’s livelihood) in pledge, Deut 24:6.
6. Honor your father and mother, don’t curse them (Lev 21:17, within homicide legislation), that is, support them in their old age (cf. Prov 19:26; Mark 7:10-13); respect the elderly, Lev 19:32.
7. Don’t withhold the wages of your workers, Deut 24:14-15 (Codex Alexandrinus); Mal 3:5; Sir 4:1; 29:6 (cf. v. 7); 31:8-9; 34:22; Mark 10:19 (an interesting and apropos addition to Decalogue commandments, for a rich person!); James 5:4.
8. Don’t move around landmarks (a big problem in the Biblical period and quite relevant today, esp. in Latin America), Deut 19:14; 27:17; Hos 5:10; Prov 23:10; 22:28; Job 24:2; in Qumran, *Damascus Document* (from the Geniza) CD-A 1:16; 5:20-21; 19:13-16 (emblematic of general apostasy).
9. Asylum for involuntary homicide, Deut 19:1-6.
10. Don’t follow “the majority” for evil, Exod 23:2.