

Isaiah 61 – background information

Justice – Mishpat (Generous Justice, pp 3-4)

"The word mishpat in its various forms occurs more than two hundred times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably. So Leviticus 24:22 warns Israel to "have the same mishpat ('rule of law') for the foreigner as the native." Mishpat means acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of the case... But mishpat means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means to give people their rights. Deuteronomy 18 directs that the priests of the tabernacle should be supported by a certain percentage of the people's income. This support is described as "the priests' mishpat," which means their due or their right. So we read, "Defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:9). Mishpat, then, is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care.

This is why, if you look at every place the word is used in the Old Testament, several classes of persons continually come up. Over and over again, mishpat describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor—those who have been called "the quartet of the vulnerable."

This is what the LORD Almighty says: Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the immigrant or the poor. Zechariah 7:9-10

Righteousness – tzadeqah (Generous Justice, pp10-11)

"We get more insight when we consider a second Hebrew word that can be translated as "being just," though it is usually translated as "being righteous." The word is tzadeqah, and it refers to a life of right relationships. Bible scholar Alec Motyer defines "righteous" as those "right with God and therefore committed to putting right all other relationships in life."

This means, then, that Biblical righteousness is inevitably "social," because it is about relationships. When most modern people see the word "righteousness" in the Bible, they tend to think of it in terms of private morality, such as sexual chastity or diligence in prayer and Bible study. But in the Bible tzadeqah refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity, and equity. It is not surprising, then, to discover that tzadeqah and mishpat are brought together scores of times in the Bible.

These two words roughly correspond to what some have called "primary" and "rectifying justice." Rectifying justice is mishpat. It means punishing wrong doers and caring for the victims of unjust treatment. Primary justice, or tzadeqah, 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. Therefore, though tzadeqah is primarily about being in a right relationship with God, the righteous life that results is profoundly social."



