

The Challenge

Mishpat / Judgement: the impact of biblical hope

MISHPAT: THE AFFIRMATION OF HOPE

Reality and *shalom*

Getting excited and enthused by the biblical concept of *shalom* will be seen by many as being close to an illusion when you measure it against the actual experience of most ordinary people in their work-a-day lives. The majority of people would think the vision of *shalom* desperately requires a reality check. A response it is all too easy to understand.

The stark evidence of everyday life, and the truth of most human experience and existence, is that the corruption of evil is everywhere. So much good in the world is stifled, its joy suffocated and its freedom restrained. Everywhere, there is pain, anguish, greed and violence; the possibility of *shalom* is hardly even a faint dream. Humanly speaking there is every reason to be cynical and contemptuous about *shalom* thinking.

However, make no mistake, alongside the vision of *shalom* the biblical writers give full recognition to the fact that sin, evil, corruption and rebellion are everywhere. Paul, in writing to Christians in Rome, puts together a powerful montage of phrases from the Hebrew scriptures to make exactly this point:

‘There is no one who is righteous not even one;
there is no one who has understanding,
there is no one who seeks God. ...
Their throats are open graves; they use their tongues to deceive.
The venom of vipers is under their lips.
Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.
Their feet are swift to shed blood;
ruin and misery are in their paths,
and the way of *shalom* they have not known.
There is no fear of God before their eyes.’
(Rom 3:10-18)¹

You can hear the realist responding, “That’s more like it!” This stark reality, so obviously part of the woof and weft of the experience of people and creation, surely vaporises any semblance of *shalom*-hope? How can a Christian understanding of eschatology possibly respond to this?

Encountering *mishpat*

Suddenly, in the face of all this horror, we encounter one of the most exciting and compelling concepts in scripture, the theme of ‘judgment’. It is central to biblical hope, and essential to the vision of *shalom*. The biblical understanding of judgment is the certainty

¹ To identify the full range of Hebrew sources that lie behind montage of graphic phrases use a good reference Bible or serious commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans.



that a 'Day'² is coming when God will uniquely break into time, space and history, as a sovereign act, to put everything right.

The biblical understanding of judgement is formed out of a nexus of ideas that flow cross the Hebrew and Greek texts:

HEBREW	GREEK
<i>Mishpat</i> Judgement – Justice	<i>Krisis</i> Judgement
<i>Zedekah</i> Righteousness	<i>Dikaiousoune</i> Justice – righteousness
<i>Chesed</i> (also <i>racham</i> and <i>chanan</i>) Mercy - Love	<i>Agape</i> (also <i>eleos</i> and <i>oiktirous</i>) Mercy - Love

The primary Hebrew word for 'judgment' is *mishpat*.³ It is also the same word for 'justice' In both cases the central meaning is 'putting everything right', with the sense of 'straightening out those things that have become twisted and corrupted'. It has been said that 'originally *mishpat* referred to the restoration of a situation or environment which promoted equity and harmony – *shalom* – in a community'⁴ The words of God to Abraham, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right – *mishpat* (Gen 18:25) are given intense meaning. It is also important to remember that *mishpat* as 'justice' is one of the three *shalom* core-words.⁵

Notice how in the nexus of ideas above there is this flow from judgement to justice, righteousness, mercy and love – in so many ways they are all-apiece, this is certainly true in Christian biblical understanding and vital in shaping our understanding of judgement.

First and foremost *mishpat* is about relationship. A relationship based on both covenant with God and the character of God. *Mishpat* is diametrically opposed to the idea of a judge who gives judgement on the basis of abstract legal principles.⁶

It is intriguing that the Greek word for 'judgement' is *krisis* from which we get our English word 'crisis'. A crisis is usually considered a breakdown in what is understood to be normal.⁷ The Hebrew word for 'crisis' is *mashber*, which comes from the root 'to break',

² For details of the idea of the 'Day of the Lord' see below

³ The other Hebrew word for 'justice' is *din*, *dyn* or *dan* and is really a synonym of *mishpat* and tends to refer to the actual act or decision of bringing *mishpat* into being

⁴ See Temba LJ Mafico, article 'Just, Justice' in DN Freedman (Ed) '*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*' Vol 3 Doubleday 1992 p1128

⁵ See page 19 above

⁶ For more on this theme G Kittel (Ed) '*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*' Vol 3 Eerdmans 1965 see VM Hertrich article *krino* p 926

⁷ 'A crucial or decisive moment, a turning-point, a time of difficulty or distress, an emergency' Chambers English Dictionary, Cambridge 1988



also means the "moment of birth" or "to give new life"; while challenging it is at the same time the process of something living and new coming into being! The Chinese word for 'crisis' is *weiji*, which literally means 'precarious moment' contains the two character elements, *wei*, "danger" and *ji* "opportunity."⁸

IMAGES OF MISHPAT

Awesome focus

Astonishingly, 'judgment' is not a subject about which Christians have tended to get excited! In fact the reverse is usually true. It is a theme that frequently brings fear, anxiety and even terror. There are several reasons for this:

- There is a long history of 'the fear of judgment', with parallel concepts such as 'the wrath of God' and 'eternal punishment', being used to manipulate people into making a Christian commitment; and then being used, consciously or unconsciously, to control their behaviour once they have become part of the local church;⁹
- The majority of Christians are completely ignorant about the true nature of biblical judgment nor do they understand its purpose;
- The biblical writers frequently use very powerful and disturbing images to convey the totality of God's final overthrow of evil – for example:

'Once again, in a little while,
I will shake the heavens and the earth
and the sea and the dry land;
and I will shake all the nations ...'
(Hag 2:6)

'This phrase, "Once again",
indicates the removal of what is shaken
-that is, created things -
so that what cannot be shaken can remain.'
(Heb 12:27)

'The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is torn asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.'
(Isa 25:19)

'Then the mountains will melt under him
and valleys will burst open,
like wax near the fire,
like waters poured down a deep place.'
(Mic 1:4)

⁸ See <http://smartisam.blogspot.com/2008/11/opportunity-in-crisis.html>;
<http://www.chief Rabbi.org/speeches/bod.html>; <http://www.ou.org/publications/ja/5762fall/Presmessage.pdf>

⁹ However much some Christians may protest that those days are long-gone, there are in fact many parts of the church in which they have not, added to this the deep psychological legacy of that way of thinking is still deeply embedded in much Christian – and even popular – consciousness.



‘I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke.
The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood.’
(Joel 2:31)

‘Then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise,
and the elements will be dissolved with fire,
the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.’
(2Pet 3:10)

Here we have high-energy apocalyptic language! It is being used to proclaim, in very graphic terms – in these cases using the images of either ‘shaking’ or ‘fire’ – the single overwhelming truth; that a ‘Day’ is coming when God will take the entire cosmos in both hands and shake the hell out of it! When every molecule within creation will be purged of evil by celestial fire, and all wickedness and perversion will be revealed and removed forever!

The whole purpose of this language and the images that are used is to focus people’s attention, not only on the horror of evil and how God feels about it, but to point to the fact that it will be dealt with and the certain hope that everything will finally be put completely right.

Word and Vision ¹⁰

Behind the language and the images that are used in the message of judgement are two important influences:

▪ **Prophecy**

Biblical prophecy is about proclaiming and *forth-telling* the character and will of God, it is *not* about *foretelling* the future. The words and the ideas about judgement given by the prophets are not giving detailed descriptions about what will ultimately happen – that would almost certainly be beyond description! They are to capture people’s attention and to reveal the nature of the present state of affairs in the light of God’s holiness and character. Their aim is to call people to live differently *now* in the light of what will happen *then*. It is calling for people to change the direction of their lives. Biblical prophecy is a major medium in communicating authentic hope, both on its emphasis on godly living now in the present, together with a confidence in the character of God that it will triumph universally and cosmically.

▪ **Apocalyptic**

A development of prophecy is word ‘apocalyptic’ (from the Gk: *apocalypsis*) has the sense of ‘to reveal’, ‘to uncover’ or ‘to unveil’; it is ‘revelation’. It indicates the disclosing of spiritual secrets or persons, the unfolding of things previously hidden, drawing back the

¹⁰ These themes are dealt with in much more detail with accompanying footnotes in ‘The Hope’ section, pages 13-15



curtain on what has been concealed up until now. The images are powerful and surreal. The primary focus is on:

- The future rather than the present
- The spiritual rather than the material
- The purposes of God rather than human actions

The overriding message is that God is in control and that no matter how desperate human circumstances become God's will shall overcome and prevail.

These cultural biblical understandings should help to bring an understanding of *mishpat* that is authentic and inspiring while preserving the seriousness of the message.

Awesome purpose

So the cry of judgment is "*Shalom!*" It is the shout of victory over the forces of violence and conflict that fracture this universe, which God created 'good'. It is the proclamation of triumph over satanic and human rebellion, over every conceivable manifestation of evil. No wonder judgment is both thrilling and sobering in its magnitude and at the very heart of the fabric of *shalom*.

'DAY OF THE LORD'

Eschatological crisis

So biblical hope looks forward and beyond to a point in the future when it will come to final and total completeness. This is the idea of 'The Day of the Lord' - an eschatological moment, an omega-point, a space-time flashpoint - when everything, in both human history and the natural world, that has been destructive and perverted will be brought to a true *shalom* conclusion, having been dealt with and resolved.

'The Day of the Lord' is referred to some 200 times in the Hebrew scriptures alone, often in a variety of ways, such as 'The Day', 'That Day', 'the great and terrible Day of the Lord' and so on.

Yahweh will defeat all enemies and will break into history to fully establish divine rule among all people and throughout nature. All opposition will be overthrown, and everyone will embrace God's relational rule. It is here that biblical hope gains its eschatological stress. The concept of the 'Day of the Lord' is made up of two main elements:

- Yahweh executing judgment; ridding the cosmos of all evil;
- Yahweh establishing peace; releasing divine *shalom* upon the earth.

Hebrew prophets each see 'The Day' as overwhelming, but they also bring their own particular insights to the vision as well:

- Amos shatters Israel's illusions that the 'Day of the Lord' would be only blessing on her while complete disaster on her enemies. Yes, she had a unique relationship with Yahweh, but this should lead to righteousness; where there is sin it will receive the

greatest punishment (3:2). 'The Day', which they expected to be light would instead be doom and darkness (5:18,20). Essentially God's judgment is a moral judgment. Amos shows that 'the Day' will bring physical catastrophe on the earth (5:7-9; 8:9; 9:5-6) accompanied by cosmic disasters (7:4)

- Zephaniah pictures the judgment even more forcefully, involving the destruction of the whole earth (1:2–3:8), with only a humble remnant escaping to enjoy God's rule. This picture of nature being disrupted recurs time and again in other prophets (eg Hab 3:6; Nahum 1:3; Isa 2:12; Hag 2:6).

On this day every person is presented with the justice of Yahweh as king; redressing wrongs and dealing with evil. From the moment of its inception God's rule is seen to have a deep moral sense, and only those who share it can be part of it. The cataclysmic eruptions in nature demonstrate Yahweh's presence and power behind everything.

The visions of the Day of the Lord illustrate the Hebrew prophets' understanding of the relationship between Yahweh and history. The kingdom is established within the world and within history, but it is not a product of historical processes, it does not gradually evolve. God is moving history to his conclusion, but the source of his rule is outside of history so only a divine intervention 'breaking into time and space' will accomplish his purpose. What we see is that there can be no true eschatology without rupture, rapture or crisis!

Finally, while the biblical understanding of judgment finds its climax and fulfillment in the 'Day of the Lord', it is nevertheless present and active in the world today. God is at work in the world to put things right now, we also have a responsibility to seek justice in our present circumstances. The 'Day of the Lord' is far from a wholly eschatological concept somewhere in the future. Amos is clear that the people of Israel faced the 'Day of the Lord' at the hands of the Assyrians. In one sense the 'Day of the Lord' is about the end of the world, and for the Israelites of the northern kingdom, 722 BC was effectively the end of their world. All this reminds us:

- That *mishpat* is primarily moral, 'putting everything right';
- That judgment is a continuous activity, a process, rather than simply a single event;
- That 'the End' is to be practically anticipated and actively lived out in the present;
- That there is an unbroken connection between the present and the future.

Judgment, therefore, is the hinge upon which the door of hope swings. It creates the environment within which the vision of *shalom* can find its ultimate fulfillment. The fact that in judgment Yahweh is ridding the cosmos of evil and putting everything right makes it one of the most exciting of all biblical concepts! It also sets the scene for a Christian understanding of the 'Day of Judgment', which we will explore later.

COMING OF THE LORD

The One that comes

In the visions of Yahweh acting decisively within history God is presented in different images, the battlefield, law-court and the throne room:

- **Warrior:** as the military conqueror, God is none other than 'the Lord of Hosts' who defeats all personal enemies and those of the covenant people, such as:

'For the Lord will come in fire,
and his chariots like the whirlwind,
to pay back his anger in fury, and his rebuke in flames of fire'
(Isa 66:15)

- **Judge:** as the one who decides between people and nations in the process of putting everything right, such as:

'Let the nations rouse themselves,
and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat¹¹
for there I will sit to judge all the neighbouring nations'
(Joel 3:12)

- **King:** as the one who establishes God's rule in the face of wickedness and is both warrior and judge, such as:

'Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on the colt the foal of a donkey'
(Zec 9:9)

Of course in reality these images over-lay and inter-twine with each other as they are worked within the biblical text.

SERVANT OF THE LORD

Anointed One (Messiah)

Biblical hope has substance because it rests upon God. The God whose self-revelation from the very beginning was as King (*melek*); the 'Lord of creation', the 'Lord of history':

'The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty;
the Lord is robed, 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.'
(Ps 93:1-2)

The Hebrew scriptures eschatological passages about 'the Day of the Lord' and the 'Age of *Shalom*' are often referred to as 'Messianic' (from the Hebrew word meaning 'anointed'). It highlights the fact that frequent, but by no means developed, references to the

¹¹ The word 'Jehoshaphat' means 'Yahweh judges', the place imagined as the 'valley of Jehoshaphat' is almost certainly the Kidron valley in Jerusalem.



expectation of a divinely appointed agent in the purposes of God. Though there are passing references to them being 'anointed', the title 'Messiah' is never used as a technical term anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. Because we are reading back from the perspective of the new covenant we are in danger of imposing on the Hebrew mind a picture that is far more developed and complete than the biblical Hebrew text presents. What we in fact have are a number of separately developing ideas about a divine agent, none of which are always present in the visions of the 'Day of the Lord'. However, what is said broadly about the 'Day of the Lord' and particularly about the divine agent overlap to such an extent that they must be held together.

Davidic king

The pre-exilic prophets made it clear that Jewish kings had not ruled well (cf Jer 21:11-22:30), but Jer 23:5-6 foresees a time when a king of David's house will rule properly. So the negative and positive are intertwined.

A very important strand is the development of the hope of the arising of an ideal Davidic ruler as the divine representative whose rule has universal consequences. Its foundation is obviously in 2 Samuel 7:16 with the everlasting covenant made with David that one of his house would rule forever. Though it has seeds in the enigmatic passage of Genesis 49:10, 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes.' This passage is clearly developed in Micah 5:2-4, where a ruler from insignificant Bethlehem in Judah extends God's reign to the ends of the earth. The 'Royal Psalms' also suggest a Davidic figure.

The prophecies of Isaiah 9:6-7 and 11:1-10 add a vital dimension. An individual 'end time' king, upon whom God's Spirit rests, brings peace to Israel and the nations. They are a righteous judge slaying the wicked and aiding the poor, administering the rule of Yahweh; a descendant of David, ('branch of Jesse'). Jeremiah and Ezekiel share a common pattern of ideas (Jer 33:22; 23:5-6; Ezk 37:25; 34:23), though Ezekiel calls him 'prince' rather than 'king' (45:7; 46:2).

Suffering servant

In complete contrast there appears another figure, who as God's agent accomplishes the divine will, not through rule but through suffering. This suffering servant of Yahweh is presented most clearly in the 'Servant songs' of Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13; 53:12).

The only other scriptures that appear to touch on this theme are:

- **Zech 12:10** 'They shall look on him whom they pierced.'
- **Zech 13:1** 'A fountain shall be opened for the house of David ... to cleanse themselves from sin.'

Whether Psalm 22 is to be linked in here is open to question, whether it is prophetic of the suffering servant, or merely a passage that was quoted as perfect to capture the agony of Jesus' distress, is uncertain. Remember, the idea of a suffering Messiah was unthinkable to the Jews of Jesus' day (Mk 8:31; 9:30-31).

Son of Man

This is the most enigmatic figure in the Hebrew Scriptures. The phrase is a natural Hebraism for 'a human being', yet its use in Daniel 7:13-14 is important. The question is whether the 'one like unto a son of man' who receives rule from God is a corporate figure synonymous with 'the people of the saints of the Most High' (7:18,27); or an individual who acts as a representative for the saints. It probably contains elements of both. It becomes developed as an individual in the intertestamental literature. However, Jesus, unhappy with the title 'Messiah' for public use, gladly used 'Son of man', yet the awkwardness of the Greek suggests that a Semitic title is being retained.

Eschatological prophet

The closest we get to the 'messianic' figure is in Isaiah 61:1-4. He is pictured as a prophetic figure proclaiming good news; neither a Davidic king, nor a suffering servant. His authority is in his anointing and his message inaugurates all the blessings of the 'Day of the Lord'.

In Deuteronomy 18:18 there is the promise, 'I will raise up for them (Israel) a prophet like you from among their brethren, and I will put my words in his mouth ...' This was frequently thought of in 'Messianic' even 'eschatological' terms. But it certainly was so by the time of Jesus (John 1:21; 6:14; 7:40) and proclaimed by the early church (Acts 3:22-26; 7:37).

These then are the strands which, woven together, formed Israel's hope. How this embryonic, though powerful, vision comes to birth in Jesus the Messiah and his work will occupy the rest of this course.

Questions & Reflections

1. What particular qualities do you think the biblical vision of *shalom* brings to a Christian understanding of hope?
2. How does an understanding of the biblical concept of *mishpat* challenge many popular and expectations about judgment?
3. What very practical actions and responses would you expect to see in the life and behaviour of someone living in the harmony of a biblical understanding of the principles of *shalom* and *mishpat* ? How might they differ from the actions and expectations of a Christian who has not been helped to understand their ideas and meaning?

Reading and Resources

Key books:

R Bauckham & T Hart '**Hope Against Hope**' Darton, Longman & Todd 1999

JB Green (Ed *et al*) '**Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**' IVP 1992: article: 'Kingdom of God' / Heaven by CC Caragounis p 417-430

G MacDonald '**The Evangelical Universalist**' SPCK 2008



NT Wright **'New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope'**

Grove Books 1999

NT Wright **'The Resurrection of the Son of God'** SPCK 2003

P Yoder **'Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice & Peace'** Life & Faith Press 1987

Other useful book resources:

J Alison **'Living in the End Times'** SPCK 1997

CE Armerding & WW Gasque (Ed) **'Handbook of Biblical Prophecy'** Baker 1977

W Barclay **'A Spiritual Autobiography'** Eerdmans Publishing Company 1977

R Bauckham **'Jude & 2 Peter'** Word 1983

R Bauckham **'The Theology of the Book of Revelation'** Cambridge 1993

GR Beasley-Murray **'The Book of Revelation'** Eerdmans 1981

J Bonda **'The One Purpose of God'** Eerdmans 1993

W Brueggemann **'Peace: Understanding Biblical Themes'** Chalice Press 2001

F Carey (Ed) **'The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come'** British Museum Press 1999

RG Close **'The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views'** IVP 1977

N Cohn **'The Pursuit of the Millennium'** Temple Smith 1970

DN Freedman (Ed) **'Anchor Bible Dictionary' Vol:3** Doubleday 1992 see article T Prendergast 'Hope' p 284

DN Freedman (Ed) **'Anchor Bible Dictionary' Vol:5** Doubleday 1992 see articles:

- Eschatology by DL Petersen p 575
- *Parousia* by Christopher Rowland p xxx

JB Green [Ed et al] **'Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels'** IVP 1992: articles:

- Apocalyptic by DC Allison
- Eschatology by DC Allison Jr p 206-209
- Son of Man by IH Marshall p 775-781

G Kittel (Ed) **'Theological Dictionary of the New Testament'** Eerdmans 1964: article *basileus* by KL Schmidt [et al] Vol 1: p 564-593

AT Lincoln **'Paradise Now and Not Yet'** Cambridge 1981

D Linn 'Good Goats – Healing our Image of God' Paultist Press

BD McLaren **'The Secret Message of Jesus'** Thomas Nelson 2006

RH Mounce **'The Book of Revelation'** Eerdmans 1977

R Parry & C Partridge (Eds) **'Universal Salvation?'** Paternoster 2003

A Richardson (Ed) **'A Theological Word Book of the Bible'** see article 'Hope' London SCM Press 1965 p 108-109

The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, **'The Mystery of Salvation'** London, Church House Publishing, 1995

D Thompson **'The End of Time'** Minerva 1997

Walter Wink **'Engaging the Powers'** Fortress Press 1992

NT Wright **'The New Testament and the People of God'** SPCK 1992

NT Wright **'Jesus and the Victory of God'** SPCK 1996

NT Wright **'Surprised by Hope'** SPCK 2007

PB Yoder & WM Swartley (Ed) **'The Meaning of Peace'** (2nd Ed) IMS Elkhart 2001

