

A Study of *Mishpat*

By C.Kuehne

Perhaps the reader will indulge the writer for a few sentences as he explains why the Hebrew word *mishpat* has held special interest for him. The first reason has to do with the common translation of this word in the King James Version. It is rendered almost uniformly “judgment,” which suggests a courtroom scene with judge and defendant, accusation and guilt, verdict and sentence. This legalistic connotation has been attached to the word in the writer’s mind for many years, with the result that he missed much of the Gospel proclamation in the prophetic books of the Old Testament.

The second reason for his interest lies in the way that Luther translated the ‘*asoth mishpat*’ of Micah 6:8. This is the well-known verse which in the KJV reads: “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” Luther comes up with a perfectly remarkable “*Gottes Wort halten*” for the two Hebrew words, reminding a person of the Lord’s declaration: “If a man love me, he will keep my words.” (John 14:23) Surely the two translations, “to do justly” and “to keep God’s Word,” at least according to their common understanding, differ significantly in their scope and in their application to a Christian’s life. The writer was attracted to Luther’s “*Gottes Wort halten*,” but wondered whether Luther might have read something into the Hebrew which was not there. The only way to find this out seemed to be a study of the word *mishpat* as it was used by the prophets of Judah, particularly Micah and his great contemporary, Isaiah.

These reasons provided the motivation for the brief study, which follows. *Mishpat* is used a total of 47 times by the two prophets, in a variety of contexts. As suggested before, it is generally translated “judgment” in the KJV—40 times to be exact. Other renderings in this version include “adversary” (*ba’al mishpat*), “discretion,” “do justly” (*‘asoth mishpat*), “ordinance,” and “right.”

***Mishpat* and Righteousness**

The first significant observation concerning the usage of *mishpat* in Isaiah and Micah is that in the majority of instances, it occurs in close connection with the word “righteousness.” Compare the following: “Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness (Is. 1:27).” “...he (the LORD) looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry (Is. 5:7).” “But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness (Is. 5:16).” “Therefore is judgement far from us, neither doth justice (righteousness) overtake us (Is. 59:9).” “I will bear the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgement for me: he will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold his righteousness (Mic. 7:9).” And many other similar examples could be given!

In studying *mishpat* we must, therefore, inquire into the meaning of “righteousness.” As we suggested in a previous issue of this journal, this term, when used of God, refers to the saving will and activity of the Lord in creating a people for Himself on earth. “Righteousness,” then, is above all a salvation word, which fact would lead us to expect that *mishpat* too may have a significance that is closely associated with the Gospel—in spite of its common translation, “judgment.”

But how might “righteousness” and *mishpat* be related? *Mishpat* is, of course, derived from the root sh-ph-t, which has the significance “to judge,” particularly to render a verdict which is in conformity with an accepted standard of right. If the “righteousness” of God is His active will of salvation, we might well expect that His *mishpat* would be the specific decisions and actions which He has revealed to mankind in carrying out this saving will.

But both “righteousness” and *mishpat* are used also of men. A “righteous” man is one in whom the righteousness of God has carried out its saving purpose—he is a believer. When such a man is said to exercise *mishpat*, might it not mean that whatever he now decides or does is conformity with God’s revealed will? But let us look into Isaiah and Micah, to see if our first impressions continuing *mishpat* can be defended.

***Mishpat* and Salvation**

In the majority of instances, *mishpat* is used in contexts which speak of the saving activity of the Lord God. Consider first Isaiah 1:27: “Zion shall be redeemed with judgement, and her converts with righteousness. “ Clearly this “judgment” is in no way punitive, for it is said to be the basis for the redemption of God’s people. These people are to be delivered from the guilt and power of sin through this marvelous judgment of God. But what is this judgement? The larger context of Isaiah surely gives us an answer. In Isaiah 53, for example, we learn of the Lord’s decision to lay the collected store of mankind’s sin upon His Servant, the promised Savior, and then let this Servant suffer the punishment for all that sin. Listen to this “judgment”: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all ... He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken... Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. “ (53:6, 8, 10f.) The *mishpat* through which Zion is redeemed is surely that plan of salvation, devised in eternity, whereby “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; ... For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:19, 21).”

In 4:2-4 we read: “In that day shall the branch of the LORD be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel. And it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem: When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning.” The elect remnant of Zion will be cleansed from the filthiness and blood-guiltiness of all its sin. This salvation will be accomplished by the Branch of the Lord, the Messiah, and it will be brought to men by the Spirit of God. How appropriate it is that the Holy Spirit is referred to as the “Spirit of *mishpat*.” For He brings men to salvation through the proclamation of the Lord’s saving activity!

We next come to the beautiful prophecy of the Child of Bethlehem: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: ... Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice (righteousness) from henceforth even for ever.” 9:6f. It is the New Testament kingdom of Christ that is here foretold. And this kingdom will be established with *mishpat* and with righteousness. Can there be any doubt that *mishpat* is here synonymous with “the gospel of the kingdom, “ of which Christ Himself speaks? (Matthew 24:14) For it is through these “good tidings of great joy” that the kingdom of the Lord is established among men.

Other verses in Isaiah likewise speak of *mishpat* as the means whereby the promised Savior will deliver poor sinners from death and destruction. In 16:5, the gentiles of Moab are pointed to Him as their only hope for rescue from the wrath of God: “And in mercy shall the throne be established: And he shall sit upon it in truth in the tabernacle of David, judging, and seeking judgment, and hasting righteousness. “ In 42:1-4, we have a prophecy which in the New Testament is applied directly to Christ: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.” Once again *mishpat* is synonymous with “Gospel, “ by which the Savior effectively brings salvation to the contrite ones in all the nations of the world.

We find an interesting use of *mishpat* in Isaiah 49:4 and 50:8. In the former passage, the suffering Servant of the Lord speaks from the depths of His humiliation, oppressed with sorrow and the fear of death in the midst of His atoning work, and yet confident that His *mishpat* is safely in the Lord's hands: "Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God." In the latter passage, the Servant speaks a defiant challenge to His adversary (*ba'al mishpat*), again confident that the Lord will give Him victory: "He is near that justifieth me; who will contend with me? let us stand together: who is mine adversary? let him come near to me." In both these verses, *mishpat* takes on the meaning of "cause." The work of redemption has been entrusted to Him as His office and calling, and even though all the hosts of evil are arrayed against Him, yet His cause shall and must prevail!

If the foregoing passages are not enough to establish the fact that *mishpat* must be counted among the salvation words of the Old Testament we could suggest still more. In Isaiah 26:8-9, those who trust in the Lord for salvation sing this praise of His judgments: "Yea, in the way of thy judgments, O LORD, have we waited for thee; the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee. With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early: for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." Listen now to 30:18, which associates the grace and mercy of the Lord with His *mishpat*: "And therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the LORD is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for him." In 32:15f. we learn that the establishment of *mishpat* in the earth is the result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: "Until the spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest. Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness

remain in the fruitful field. " We believe that also the following passages from Isaiah, studied in their context, impart to *mishpat* the concept of deliverance and salvation: 33:2-5; 51:4f.; 58:2 (a description of the hypocrisy of the people of Jacob, with *mishpat* translated as "ordinance" and "ordinances"); 59:8-15 (a lament that salvation remains so far from the people); and 61:8. Finally, we quote a verse from Micah, in which the penitent people of God look to the LORD for deliverance: "I will bear the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me: he will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold his righteousness (7:9)."

How beautiful, then, this word *mishpat* should be in the ears of every contrite sinner. For it declares to the sinner the grace and mercy of the Triune God, as He plans and then carries out the work of salvation. We see the Father, imputing the sins of the world to His Son. We see the Son, bringing about the redemption of the world and establishing His kingdom through the Gospel. And we see the Holy Spirit, working in the hearts of men, bringing about their conversion and sanctification. Henceforth when this writer sees the word "judgment" in the prophets of the Old Testament, he will no longer think first of sin and condemnation, but rather of righteousness and salvation!

***Mishpat* as Punitive Judgment**

Yet it must be recognized that *mishpat* is used also of God's punitive judgment upon the unbelief and wickedness of men. In 3:14 Isaiah declares that the Lord will bring punishment upon the leaders of Jerusalem-Judah, because they have misled the people and destroyed His vineyard: "The LORD will enter into judgment with the ancients of his people, and the princes thereof: for ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses." The following verses also are in contexts which speak of punishment: "But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness (5:16)." "Judgement also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place (28:17)." "For my sword shall be bathed in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment (34:5)."

There is actually no real contradiction between these two uses of *mishpat*, namely, for salvation and for punishment. For the deliverance of God's remnant must often include the destruction of the wicked leaders and false prophets that have been leading the people astray, or of the heathen nations which have determined to destroy the people. Through such *mishpat* a separation is made between the unrighteous and the righteous, and the righteous are thereby delivered.

In two other verses in Isaiah *mishpat* again takes on the thought of punitive judgment. 53:8 speaks of the judicial violence to which the Servant of the Lord was subjected during His trial: "He was taken from prison and from judgment." And in 54:17 the redeemed of Zion are assured that they shall be victorious over all those who bring attacks against them: ". . . every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn."

Mishpat and Men

In the foregoing paragraphs we have considered *mishpat* as a manifestation of God's saving activity in this world. The word, however, is used also of men. It is God's desire that those whom He has saved now serve Him in "righteousness" and "judgment." In making them His own, He has given them a new heart and a new mind, so that their will now conforms to His will. Thus they are able to serve Him in "righteousness." And because of this righteousness which has been created in them (in the sense of Ephesians 4:24), they strive after this, that all their desires, thoughts, words, and deeds be determined in accordance with the Lord's revealed will. Thus they are able to serve Him also in "judgement."

Let us look now at some of the passages in which *mishpat* is used of men. In Isaiah 1:16 the convicted inhabitants of Judah-Jerusalem were commanded to put off sin. In the verse that follows they are exhorted to "seek judgment, " to strive after the divine norm of right in their dealings with their fellowmen. In 28:5-6 (which we take as Messianic in view of 4:2), the promised Savior is said to serve for a "spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment." Even so, in Christ and His Word the believer is able to test all things and decide them aright. In 32:1 we have a picture of the glorious kingdom of the Messiah, in which the "princes shall rule in judgment, " namely, according to the revealed will of the divine King who rules over them. In 56:1 the penitent of the Lord are exhorted: "Thus saith the LORD, Keep ye judgment, and do justice (righteousness): for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed." The wonderful message of salvation should prompt them to walk according to the will of their God, bringing forth "fruits meet for repentance (Matthew 3:8)."

The exercising of *mishpat* is seen in these verses to be a fruit of faith in the lives of those who have been saved. Where such faith is lacking, *mishpat* is no longer present among them. Isaiah laments that Jerusalem is no longer "full of judgment (1:21)." The Lord "looked for judgment" in Judah but found only oppression (5:7). Likewise Micah upbraids the leaders of the people for "failing to know judgment (3:1)." More than that, they "abhor judgment, and pervert all equity," turning away from the divine norm of God's Law, and making crooked everything that should have been kept straight (3:9).

Several paragraphs above we found the word *mishpat* used for the "cause" of the divinely called Servant of the Lord. We find the same word used for the "cause" or "right" of God's people, which He in His grace and mercy is eager to uphold and defend. In Isaiah 10:2, the wicked tyrants are condemned by God, in that they "take away the right from the Door of (God's) people." In 32:7, the prophet comments on the practices of the fraudulent, as he "deviseth wicked devices to destroy the poor with lying words, even when the needy speaketh right," even when the needy appeals to the standard of right set up by God in His Word. In 40:27, Isaiah tells the true Jacob and Israel, now suffering evil days, that they need not think that the Lord has closed His eyes to their plight and overlooked their cause: "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God?"

Miscellaneous Uses of *Mishpat*

There remain a few uses of *mishpat* in Isaiah and Micah which do not fit too well in the above categories. In Isaiah 28:26, *mishpat* is used of divine instruction imparted to the "plowman": "For his God doth

instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him. “God is said to instruct this farmer “to *mishpat*,” namely, according to the right rules of agriculture.

In 40:14, the prophet asks this question concerning the Lord God: “Who taught him in the path of judgment?” No one, of course, for He is the source of all *mishpat*! And in 41:1, the Lord offers this majestic challenge to the rebellious leaders of the gentile world: “Let us come near to judgment.” Before this unnamed tribunal, a just and proper sentence will be passed upon their respective causes.

In Micah 3:8, the prophet says of himself: “But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin. “Because Micah was filled with the power of utterance by the Holy Spirit, he was therefore able to declare “judgment” unto the erring people. Here *mishpat* is clearly the Word of God, as it was revealed by the Holy Spirit to the prophet.

A Conclusion

If we were now asked to point to a single concept which especially attaches itself to *mishpat* in the books of Isaiah and Micah, we would suggest “the revealed Word of God.” For we have seen that the word is repeatedly synonymous with “Gospel,” the revelation of God’s plan of salvation for a world of sinners. We have seen also that in several instances it is associated with the Law, as it threatens punishment upon those who dare to place themselves in opposition to the saving work of God. And we have seen it equated with the revealed standard of right according to which God would have His people walk.

We must, then, conclude that Luther’s translation of ‘*asoth mishpat* in Micah 6:8 is a most excellent one -“*Gottes Wort halten*.” And this opinion is shared also by Dr. Theo. Laetsch in his commentary on this phrase: “‘Do justly’, literally, establish the norm of justice and judgment, not a human norm, but the unalterable norm of the Lord. His norm of the Law, which demands perfect righteousness, and His norm of the Gospel, which gives to man the perfect righteousness procured by Christ and made man’s own through faith in Christ. This latter norm does not annul the former, but establishes it (Rom. 3:31), by engendering and nourishing in man that love toward God and man demanded by the Law. The establishment of God’s Gospel is the chief duty of the Church.”

Let the *mishpat* of our God, then, be the object of our study and meditation all the days of our life, treasuring it for what it is—the precious Word of our Savior God. For as the Lord Christ promises: “Blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it!” (Luke 11: 28)