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**JUDICIAL OFFICERS.** See STATE OFFICIALS.

## JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

These concepts are prominent in the Historical Books because they are closely connected to government and kingship. Securing justice and righteousness was perhaps the primary responsibility of the judge or the king in Israel, and any ruler who failed to do so was in serious difficulty (see 2 Kings 21:26; 23:4). However, it is important to point out that in the Historical Books, as in the OT as a whole, these concepts are not precisely congruent with the connotations given to the terms *justice* and *righteousness* in English. There are three primary sets of Hebrew root words involved: *špt*, *šdq* and *yšr*. The first, usually translated "just," "justice" or "judge," has to do with order in life and the means of bringing about that order. Both the second and the third have to do with what is "right" in a given situation. Thus a ruler was expected to bring about the right kind of order in his domain. If it could be said of him, as it was of David, that "he did what was just [*mšpāt*] and right [*šēdāqā*] for all his people" (2 Sam 8:15; 1 Chron 8:14), then he was highly successful. In this article righteousness and justice are considered first separately and then together.

1. Righteousness
2. Justice
3. Justice and Righteousness

### 1. Righteousness.

At the heart of the Israelite conception of behavior is the contrast between that which is "right" and that which is "wrong." For that culture, the modern idea that these concepts might be relative to changing situations or persons would have been unthinkable. The character and will of God had been revealed to Israel, and right was ever

defined as that which conformed to those two factors. This understanding is the same in the Historical Books as it is in the rest of the OT. Nevertheless, it must be noted immediately that the Hebrew writers fully understood that God has not revealed every detail of life, and that it is necessary for persons to make decisions about what seems right to them under the circumstances.

**1.1. Right.** The preceding point is confirmed by a study of the Hebrew root *yšr*, which has the basic meaning “to be in conformity with, to be right.” In both verb and noun forms this root conveys the idea of “what is right in someone’s eyes”—that is, “to be pleasing.” A vivid example of this occurs in the Historical Books when it is said that Samson found a young Philistine woman “pleasing” and demanded that his parents make arrangements for him to marry her (Judg 14:3, 7). The readers sense that the narrator is leading them to believe that indeed this young woman was not “right,” because the question of what was pleasing to God had not been asked. Several of the other verbal usages, while not necessarily raising these overtones, clearly speak of that which the main actor believes best to serve his own self-interests: Saul (1 Sam 18:20), David (1 Sam 18:26) and Absalom (2 Sam 17:4). The noun is used in this same way when it is said that during the judges period “everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg 17:6; 21:25). The remaining occurrences of the verb merely speak of that which “seems like a good idea” (1 Chron 13:4; 2 Chron 30:4).

Apart from the two occurrences of the noun *yāšār* in Judges, almost all other uses of the noun in the Historical Books (twenty-four out of thirty-five) speak of that which was “right in the eyes of the Lord.” Most of these are found in the books of Kings and Chronicles (with some being parallels). They normally appear in commendations of kings who are considered on this basis to be “good” kings (e.g., 1 Kings 11:33; 2 Kings 12:2 [2 Chron 24:2]). Several of the remaining usages of the noun imply the same thing: what is right is ultimately determined by what is right in God’s estimation. Thus Samuel promises the people that in the fear of the Lord he will teach them “the good and right way” (1 Sam 12:23), and it is said that Hezekiah did what “was good and right and true before Yahweh his God” (2 Chron 31:20). All these occurrences of the root *yšr* tend to confirm the point being made in Proverbs 21:2

that whatever one’s own estimation of right may be, the final adjudication belongs to the Lord.

**1.2. Righteous, Righteousness.** The forms of the root *šdq* assume even more directly that “right” is determined by Yahweh alone. The verb occurs only twice (2 Sam 15:4; 1 Kings 8:32 [2 Chron 6:23]). In the first occurrence Absalom implicitly asserts his right to kingship by saying that if he had a chance, he could do right for a wronged person. In the second occurrence Solomon calls upon the Lord in a case when one person has sinned against another to condemn the guilty party and to “justify” the innocent party. The noun form *šaddīq*, “righteous one,” declares that God is the quintessential such one, doing the right thing consistently, even when his people have done wrong consistently (2 Chron 12:6; Neh 9:8, 33). But that rightness is not only that he brought well-deserved punishment upon them; it is also that he continued to keep his covenant with them when there was absolutely no reason to do so (Ezra 9:15). Such rightness goes far beyond mere legal correctness. This divine character then demands that those who rule in Yahweh’s name mirror it (2 Sam 23:3).

The noun *šēdāqā* occurs fifteen times in the Historical Books. Oddly enough, the alternative masculine form *šedeq* does not appear in this portion of the canon even though elsewhere it occurs interchangeably with the feminine form. In most of these fifteen occurrences the emphasis is upon righteous behavior, actions that are right according to some understood norm. This is the way the Lord acts (Judg 5:11; 1 Sam 12:7), and it is the way a king is expected to act (2 Sam 8:15; 22:21, 25; 1 Kings 3:6; 10:9). It reflects conformity to a clear standard, with the result that it can be, and should be, rewarded (1 Sam 26:23; 2 Sam 22:21, 25; 1 Kings 8:32 [2 Chron 6:23]).

Thus it is plain that “righteousness” in the Historical Books is to do that which is right, or correct, or desirable to the Lord. It is not some condition that one possesses in oneself. It is conformity to the absolute standard of the character and wishes of the covenant Lord.

## 2. Justice.

**2.1. Judge.** Forms of the root *špt* occur 148 times in the Historical Books. Of these, nearly half (seventy-six occurrences) are the noun form *mīšpāt*. A significant number of the sixty-nine occurrences of the verb form are the participial form *šōpēt* (twenty-three occurrences), usually

rendered “a judge.” This translation tends to confuse many modern readers who do not see the OT \*judges operating in the fashion of a modern judicial figure. The confusion is legitimate, for although the OT judges did decide right and wrong when disputes were brought before them (e.g., 2 Sam 15:4; 1 Kings 3:9), their roles were considerably broader than that. Furthermore, the judgments rendered usually were ad hoc rather than, as in our context, by an appeal to some established law code (cf. Solomon’s “judgment” concerning the two women claiming the same child [1 Kings 3:28]). In Joshua the judges seem to have been one segment of officialdom. Thus they are included with the “elders,” “heads” and “officers” of the people (Josh 8:33; 23:2; 24:1) in official assemblies. The same situation seems to have held true in the kingdom period, when the position of judge is included in listings with “officers,” “captains,” “governors” and “chiefs of fathers’ houses” (1 Chron 23:4; 26:9; 2 Chron 1:2; cf. also 2 Chron 19:5-6; Ezra 10:14).

The inclusion of judges in these lists of officials suggests that their roles may have been somewhat circumscribed. But that is definitely not the case in the book of Judges, where the judge was uniquely appointed by God to deliver Israel from the enemies who had oppressed them (e.g., Judg 2:16, 18; 3:10; 11:27). Typically, these judges were champions who in dependence on God delivered their people out of the wrongful oppression in which they languished. Then, after this act of judgment, they typically would continue to “judge” the people for a period of years. Clearly, while this included hearing disputes and rendering judgments, it also involved overall governing of the land, so that the larger function of the judge was to bring God’s order for life to reality in the land. But this position of leadership was not hereditary, and when the judge died, there typically was a hiatus during which the nation would diverge from God’s order, and the people soon found themselves back under oppression. Furthermore, the closing chapters of the book of Judges at least imply that even during their lifetimes the judges frequently lacked the requisite authority to enforce their leadership, with the result that “everyone did whatever seemed right to themselves” (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Among the other nations it was the king who filled the role of judge (1 Sam 8:5), and ultimately the Israelites demanded that they be given a king for this purpose (1 Sam

8:20). A justification for this request was that Samuel’s sons whom he had appointed to succeed him as judges proved unequal to the task in that they “accepted bribes and perverted justice” (1 Sam 8:3-5). An illustration of this role of the judge not only to decide what was right in any given circumstance, but also to see that the decision was enforced, is seen when God is called on to “judge” his people by repaying the wicked, bringing on them what they have done (1 Kings 8:32; 2 Chron 6:23). Thus, in the broadest sense, to be a judge in Israel was to have the responsibility of doing everything necessary to bring the divine order into existence, from the smallest dispute between two persons, up to and including the fate of the entire nation.

**2.2. Right Order.** The Hebrew word *mīšpāt* expresses the idea of “right, or appropriate, order.” The large number of different English terms used to translate the seventy-six occurrences of this word in different translations in the Historical Books is a convincing testimony to the breadth of the concept involved. Some of these are “manner,” “custom,” “practice,” “quota,” “plan,” “specification,” “prescribed way,” “ordinance,” “law,” “regulation,” “judgment,” “verdict,” “justice” and “just cause.” This wide array can be summed up under the heading given above: “right order,” whether customary or prescribed. Thus the term can be used to describe customary behavior, as is shown by occurrences such as that in Judges 18:7 describing the pattern of life among the Sidonians (see also 2 Kings 1:7; 17:26-27, 33-34), or that in 2 Kings 11:14 telling where the king customarily stood in the temple. One of the more interesting such usages of this term is found in 1 Samuel 8, where Samuel uses it to warn the people of the despotic way in which kings customarily acted (1 Sam 8:9, 11). He said that it was the *mīšpāt* of kings to act in such ways. But it is more common in the Historical Books, as in the rest of the OT, for the term to refer to a prescribed order. In some cases the idea of prescription is more implicit than explicit. So it is said that the Israelites marched around the city of \*Jericho in the same “manner” each day (Josh 6:15). Although they were conforming to the original directions of God (Josh 6:3-4), the point is that they were following the same plan each time. The idea of plan is clearly what is intended in 1 Kings 6:38, where it is said that Solomon finished building

the temple “according to all its *mīšpāt* (NIV: “specifications”; NASB: “plans”).

This idea of prescribed order gives rise to a very frequent use of *mīšpāt* as “regulations” (also “ordinances,” “judgments,” “laws”) (see Law). Here the emphasis is upon the fact of prescription. Thus Samuel, after having told the people how kings customarily act (1 Sam 8:9, 11), laid down “regulations” for how the Israelite kings *should* act (1 Sam 10:25). Ultimately, the Israelites believed that it is Yahweh who has laid down the prescriptions for the right order of life (2 Chron 16:12, 14; 19:8), and the term appears in conjunction with the other terms used in the OT to express this idea. These include “statutes,” “commandments,” “testimonies” and “instructions” (see Josh 24:25; 1 Sam 30:25; 2 Sam 22:23; 1 Kings 2:3; 6:12; 8:58; 2 Chron 7:17; 19:10; Ezra 7:10; Neh 1:7; 9:13). Life was to be lived in the light of these prescriptions, but it is clear that “to do *mīšpāt*” did not so much involve continual appeal to specific prescriptions as it did living a life that generally embodied such a prescribed order. Thus the role of the Israelite king (understood as *sōpēt*, “judge”) was not so much to enforce specific prescriptions as to see that the kind of order prescribed by Yahweh was maintained in the land (1 Kings 3:11). But that, of course, required that the king be quite familiar with all those prescriptions (2 Sam 22:23; 1 Kings 6:12). Perhaps the greatest irony found in the Historical Books is that Solomon, the man who had asked for wisdom in order to discern *mīšpāt*, ended up being the king who led Israel away from that divine order (1 Kings 11:33).

When a king or judge made a regulation or acted according to one, English translations frequently say that he “gave judgment” (or “rendered a verdict,” or even “did justice”). This is coming closer to the narrower connotations of the English “justice.” But even here the broader Hebrew concept of right order must be kept in mind. There is no idea here of abstract “rights” that somehow inhere in the individual. Rather, the issue is, given the revealed character of God the Creator and given his revealed purposes for

the order of life in his creation, what is the right thing to do in a given set of circumstances to maintain that order? To be sure, given God’s clear valuing of individual persons, persons could expect to be treated rightly. Thus someone’s *mīšpāt* could refer to a “just cause” that the person had (2 Sam 15:4; 1 Kings 8:45, 49, 59; 2 Chron 6:35, 39).

### 3. Justice and Righteousness.

As we noted at the outset, the duty of the ruler of God’s people was “to do justice and righteousness for all his people” (2 Sam 8:15; 1 Kings 10:9). This did not mean to enforce some abstract law code or to ensure the inherent rights of his subjects; rather, it meant to be so in tune with the Author of the universe, his character and his wishes, that his “rightness” and his order for life would be made to prevail in the nation, with the inevitable result that that “good” which is inherent in the creation of the good God will be unleashed upon the earth. These concepts are not unique to Israel, as K. W. Whitlam (44-45) shows. But what is unique is the character of the right order called for in the light of the unique character of the Israelite God.

See also LAW.

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