

The Concept of Sacred Justice in Hebrew Eschatology

Gary Selchert

It is a curious fact that while Bahá'í students of prophecy have paid considerable attention to Biblical references to "Glory" as a motif in end-of-the-age imagery, they have devoted noticeably less printed space to discussions of references to "Justice" and "Judgment." Often the relationship between Christian and Bahá'í teachings has been depicted preeminently as a contrast between Christian concern with the salvation of the individual soul and the Bahá'í program to transform the social order of the planet. Admittedly this schema is in accordance with Shoghi Effendi's comments on the role of Christianity in the progress of religion. Reducing the relationship solely to this dimension of comparison, however, does not fully account for the range and scope of social prescriptions strewn throughout the Bible, and especially prominent in the ancient Hebrew scriptures. Centuries before Jesus, Peter, and Paul ventured forth to bring personal spiritual salvation to the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, the social order of the Israelite tribes was legislated, adjudicated, and enforced in accordance with the Covenant and Law of Moses. While not world-embracing in its vision, the Mosaic order is certainly our original example of a divine standard of justice. The notion of justice as a divinely ordained pattern of social organization does not begin with Bahá'u'lláh.

That justice is one of the central organizing concepts of Bahá'u'lláh's order is clear from even a cursory examination of Bahá'í introductory material and stands out as a dominant theme in many in-depth studies of the Bahá'í scriptures. "The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice," Bahá'u'lláh asserts unequivocally.¹ And elsewhere He emphasizes: *"that the essence of justice and the source thereof are both embodied in the ordinances prescribed by Him who is the Manifestation of the Self of God amongst men, if ye be of them that recognize this truth. He doth verily incarnate the highest, the inflexible standard of justice unto all creation."*²

It is therefore all the more startling that Bahá'ís isolate themselves from the common universe of western theological discourse by generally ignoring the truth that justice, understood as an aspect of obedience to God's will, is a fundamental organizing principle which pervades the Hebrew scriptures and is by no means absent from the New Testament. This principle is well known to Old Testament scholars,³ and has a determining role in the formation of social ethics both for Jews and for progressive Christians. It is the bedrock upon which the theological trend known as "Social Gospel" is erected. It even appears from time to time in the literature of theologically conservative, evangelical Protestants.⁴ Indeed, this scriptural norm is available to Bahá'ís as a common meeting ground for discussion and fellowship with many progressive and educated Christians.

At the same time it is the very familiarity of the scriptural concept of Sacred Justice which paradoxically inhibits migration of Christian intellectuals from their Christian social and organizational milieu. Justice as a focal point of religion is not a revelation to them. Christians thoroughly familiar with the Bible and holding to a liberal, rather than literal, interpretation need not adopt the eccentric customs and settings of what is viewed as a tiny if amiable sect (the Bahá'í community) in order to propagate (and certainly not to finance the application of) religious sentiments of peace, tolerance, justice, equality, and charity.

And while many of our tolerant, progressive, and reformist social principles are shared by Christians of many denominations, both the precepts in which the Bahá'í revelation shows its continuity with clas-

sic scriptural morality, as well as in the clearest examples of its originality, can serve to alienate, respectively, theological liberals and conservatives. In its advocacy of a global theonomous commonwealth, hewing tenaciously to the encompassing principle of Divine Revelation and holding liberal social principles of justice alongside very strict personal and sexual mores, the Bahá’í community may fairly be said to be unique, even radical in its own way, viewed from the perspectives of Christian or secular liberalism. Yet amidst a post-communist intelligentsia, skeptical of all institutional authority and reluctant even to hold privately, much less enforce publicly, moralistic views of sexuality in almost any form, a community subject to an infallible House of Justice and unyielding in its refusal to institutionally embrace late twentieth-century standards of alternative family commitments can easily be viewed as authoritarian on the one hand and puritanical on the other. It is, in fact, viewed on occasion as elitist and reactionary.

Likewise, from the perspective of conservative Christian literalism, there is nothing commonplace in the Bahá’í contention that an allegorical reading of prophecy in conjunction with enlightened human reason can adequately substantiate a claim to post-Biblical revelation on a level with Moses or Jesus. But neither is there *prima facie* anything acceptable in such a claim.

So lest we claim modern originality for ancient ideas, and before we can say with assurance exactly what original and constructive contributions Bahá’u’lláh has made to the planetary discussion, and which of those original ideas can be implemented only within the context of a the Covenant-bound Bahá’í community, we must know with clarity what has been said and done in times past. To sift through what has been agreed upon and taught by prophets and theologians before us, in order to clarify the new issues which we raise and upon which the world must yet decide for or against, falls within the purview of Bahá’í scholarship. For so long as the Bahá’í community remains ill-informed concerning the biblical origins of the concept of Sacred Justice, we will be unable to discuss intelligently with our Jewish, Christian, and Islamic fellows what course the application of that ideal ought to take through the tempests of future centuries.

I.

The first problem we encounter when treating the role of justice as an element of Hebrew, or Old Testament, teaching is the question of exactly with which Hebrew concept are we dealing. Where the word “justice” appears in the King James Version of Hebrew scripture, it nearly always translates the word *tsediqah*. This word, however, and other derivatives of the root *tsediq* are more commonly translated “righteous” or “righteousness,” and its denotations and connotations are closer to the general concepts of goodness, fairness, morality, and innocence than to the more formal and even judicial connotations of the English word “justice.” Presumably for this reason modern Bible translations have tended to abandon the use of “justice” to translate *tsediqah*, which is now typically rendered as “righteousness.”

At the same time, the word “judgment,” which is the King James’ rendering of the Hebrew noun *Mishpat*, has come to be seen by translators as too narrow and perhaps too negative in connotation for modern speakers of English to capture the conceptual richness and the intrinsically positive importance of the Hebrew word. The word *Mishpat*, then, is now conventionally translated as “justice.” In point of fact, both concepts are of preeminent importance to the overall motivation and purpose of Hebrew religion, as witnessed by the comment which God makes to his angelic escort in Genesis 18:19 (RSV): “*I have chosen [Abraham], that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way (d’rek) of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice (tsediqah va mishpat).*”

One sense of the meaning intended by justice or *mishpat*, as it appears in the law of Moses, is conveyed by Exodus 23:6-9: “*You shall not pervert the justice (mishpat) due to your poor in his suit (rib). Keep far from a false charge, and do not slay the innocent (nahqí) and righteous (tsediq), for I will not acquit (tsadaq) the wicked (rahshahg). And you shall take no bribe, for the bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause (debiri) of those who are in the right (tsediqím). You shall not oppress the stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*” In the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus, the concern for justice is extended into such issues as charity for the indigent and the wayfarer, fair wages for the day laborer, and impartiality towards rich and poor alike in the courts of law.

God's justice, however, is not the ill-defined social and judicial good which is the goal of social striving in our secular age. Rather it constituted the objective standard of justice and social order existing in the mind of God and exemplified among His people by the commandments (*mitzva'ot*) and ordinances (*mishpatim*) of the Torah. Nor is the concept of *mishpat* confined to issues strictly regulated by law. It also encompassed such elements of the social order as may be translated by "order," "manner," "fashion," or "custom" (cf. Table 1). And while it can refer to what is strictly speaking "lawful," it can also refer to the order of a "ceremony" or to an individual's "charge" or responsibility.

Morphologically, *mishpat* (M-SH-P-T) is derived from the root verb *shephat* (SH-P-T), "to judge" or "to govern." The logical independence of *mishpat* from written law (torah) is implied by the fact that Moses, after the suggestion of his father-in-law, Jethro, appointed judges (*shephatim*) to govern the daily affairs of the Israelites prior to the revelation of the Law on Sinai (Exodus 18:1-27). This implies the existence of an existing body of tradition, custom, and "common law," which was understood to reflect God's will, and according to which prosecutions and lawsuits could be decided.

II.

Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, God's expectations of kindness, justice, and righteousness are reiterated, and in Deut. 32:3-4 justice is revealed as intrinsic to the nature of God's own greatness and perfection: "*I will proclaim the name of the LORD, Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the rock, His works are perfect, and all his ways (d'reki) are just (mishpat). A faithful God who does no wrong, upright (tsediq) and just (yshar) is he.*" In the twenty-sixth chapter of Leviticus, God lays out the Promise and the Threat. To the nation, God promises peace, strength, freedom, and prosperity if His commands are observed. And again to the nation, God threatens the most extreme punishments of famine, plague, military defeat, exile and destruction if his commands go unheeded.

The written books of torah however are not overwhelmingly devoted to noble ideals and social legislation. Lengthy portions of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers are devoted to regulations concerning tabernacle/temple ritual, ornamentation, and furnishings, priestly vestments, behavior, and purification, clean and unclean foods, persons, and situations, animal blood sacrifices, Sabbaths, festivals, and Holy days, and the quarantine of persons with noxious and degenerative diseases. These seem to have been scrupulously kept, at least by the priesthood, from very ancient times. But through His servants the prophets, God warns Israel in dire terms that without careful adherence to *mishpat*, scrupulous obedience to ritual prescriptions of the torah may be of no value. Although ritual requirements seem, within the text of the books of torah, to be as integral to covenant faithfulness as social and moral requirements, the prophets often treat the rituals as ultimately offensive to God when offered in a context of social injustice. Indeed, the essential entailment of correct worship was submission and obedience to God's *mishpat*.

Isaiah, believed by some to be the first of the literary prophets,⁵ makes clear in Isaiah 1:10-28, the nature of God's plan: "*Hear the word of the LORD...I have had enough of burnt offerings...I do not delight in the blood of bulls...incense is an abomination to me...your appointed feasts my soul hates...cease to do evil...learn to do good...seek justice, correct oppression.*" Amos, believed by many others to be the earliest of the prophets, proclaims a similar message: "*I hate, I despise your feasts...though you offer me your burnt offerings...I will not accept them...But let justice (mishpat) roll down like waters, and righteousness (tsediqah) like an ever-flowing stream*" (Amos 5:21-24).

While often paired in this manner with the concept of *tsediqah*,⁶ or Righteousness, *mishpat* is also paired with the concept of *hesed*, variously translated as "kindness," "goodness," "mercy," and "steadfast love." Hosea rejects empty ritual in favor of genuine and heartfelt obedience motivated by *hesed*. "*I desire hesed, not sacrifice,*" says Hosea, "*the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.*" (Hosea 6:6) In Matthew, Jesus twice quotes this passage as a rebuke to Pharisees when they criticize His ritual laxness, and He, in turn, upbraids them for over-strict rigidity. Micah explicitly conjoins the two concepts in Micah 6:8: "*He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do mishpat and to love hesed, and to walk humbly with your God?*" Here again, in a stinging rebuke to the religious leaders of His day, Jesus echoes this conjunction, *mishpat* and *hesed*, in Matthew 23:23: "Woe

to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier issues of the law, justice [krisin(Gk)=mishpat(Hb)] and mercy [eleos(Gk)=hesed(Hb)] and faithfulness [NIV]; these you ought to have done without neglecting the others.” Justice in this larger sense is clearly an important value not only in the Hebrew scriptures, but in the Christian Testament as well.

For Isaiah, *mishpat* is an integral part of God’s greatness: “Man will be brought low and mankind humbled, the eyes of the arrogant humbled. But the LORD Almighty is exalted by his *mishpat*, and the holy God will show Himself holy by His *tsediqah*.” (Is. 5:16) In fine, Jeremiah links all three concepts and their pivotal importance in Jer. 9:23-24: “This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises *hesed*, *mishpat*, and *tsediqah* on earth, for in these I delight’, declares the LORD.”

III.

Of course anyone with the most cursory knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures knows that the nation of Israel did not live up to the standards which God had set in the books of the Torah. Idolatry, the abandonment of the worship of the one true God for the superstitious worship of many, injustice, and the abandonment of God’s systematic plan of a just social order strained the relationship between Israel and its God to the very breaking point. By the time of the earliest literary prophets, God’s message already bore the repetitious burden of imminent disaster.

Already in his second chapter, Isaiah begins to develop this theme. “The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the pride of men shall be humbled; and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. For the LORD of Hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high.” (Isaiah 2:11-12) Then in chapter thirteen: “The day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come...Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it...I will punish the world for its evil.” (Isaiah 13:6-11) God’s fury appears to be absolute and cosmic: “The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.” (Isaiah 24:5-6) “The earth is utterly broken, the earth is rent asunder, the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man, it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and it will not rise again. On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.” (Isaiah 24:19-23)

Amos also gives us evidence that the threat of “The Day” is an early theme of the prophets. Indeed it seems to have already had its place in the common beliefs of the Israelites as a time when their God would defeat their enemies, a time to be wished and prayed for. But Amos tells us however that the suffering will be universal. “Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness and not light; as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.” (Amos 5:18-19)

The prophet Zephaniah again emphasizes the time frame: “The great day of the LORD is near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the mighty man cries aloud there.” (Zeph. 1:14) Historically, this might seem to indicate he is referring in an allegorical manner to the Babylonian conquest and exile, which was indeed near and hastening fast. His description, though, is at least as extreme as his fellow prophets. God, says Zephaniah, “will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth.... In the fire of his jealous wrath, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full, yea, sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.” (Zeph. 1: 2, 18) Obadiah and Joel both reiterate the nearness of the day (Obadiah 16 and Joel 1:5) but they do so after the defeat and exile to Babylon have already occurred. As such, it was understood from then on as a prophetic warning of the time of the End, an end which could occur at any time. Thus, when John the Baptist asks the Pharisees in Matthew 3:7, “Who told you to flee from the wrath to come?”, the question is purely rhetorical; the prophets told them.

The litany of doom repeats itself throughout the prophets, and of course historically we know that the people of Israel and Judah did go into exile, prison, and death. But God does not seem prepared to leave the issue there. The trauma of exile and dispersion did excite the Israelite nation to repentance and religious revival. After 70 years, as the story goes, God inspired the conquering Persian king Cyrus, and later his successor Artaxerxes, to decree permission for the Israelites to return to their homeland and rebuild their capital and their temple. But God has a larger grievance, not only with Israel, but with the nations of the world. God punishes Israel as a parent punishes a child, but God's anger toward Israel's neighbors is the fury of a parent toward people who have unjustly mistreated her child. One by one, and then collectively, God decries the evils committed by the nations which surround Israel and which extend across the face of the earth. God declares himself ready to crush them and annihilate their peoples, to utterly dislocate and destroy the sun, the moon, the stars, and the entire earth itself. And then He waits.

What then is the meaning of His threat? Is God a braggart, engaging in childish hyperbole? Is His sense of time so vast that human time frames are meaningless? Just what does God mean when He speaks of "*The Day*"? And how exactly does "*the Day*" lead to the establishment of *mishpat* on the earth?

IV.

What God wishes, of course, is not the destruction of what He has created. In Jer 18:5-11, God is most explicit concerning the point of the great threat. "*If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will...destroy it, and if that nation...turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it.... Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.*" And what does God ask that will induce Him to revoke the sentence? "*Execute mishpat in the morning, and deliver from the oppressor him who has been robbed, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of your evil doings.*" (Jer. 21:11)

But while *mishpat* can, in some circumstances, be an accomplishment of an ordinary individual, first and foremost it is a social virtue, and like most social policy, it is seldom under the control of the poor and the powerless. Rather it is for the poor and the powerless that God and His prophets speak out to warn the wealthy and the powerful.

Just as the theme of justice often appears as a salient point in lists of God's expectations, its absence likewise appears prominently in lists of Israel's offenses. "*You have turned mishpat into poison,*" Amos rails, "*and the fruit of tseḏiqah into wormwood.*" (Amos 6:12) Isaiah reminds Israel that they are the "*vineyard of the LORD*" where he "*looked for mishpat, but behold...Bloodshed!*" (Isaiah 5:7-10) Isaiah continues by indicting the wealthy "*who join house to house, who add field to field*" and warning them that "*many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitants.*" Isaiah even plays on the meaning of *mishpat* to make his point in Is. 3:13-15: "*the LORD takes His place in court; He rises to judge the people. The LORD enters into judgment (mishpat) against the elders and leaders of His people: 'It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?'* declares the Lord Almighty." (Jer. 21:12)

Again Isaiah reminds the Judeans that He has punished them for their injustices and disobedience in the past and will not hesitate to chastise them further if they continue in evil. "*Therefore,*" he says, "*as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the torah of the LORD of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.*" (Isaiah 5:24) "*Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers [of judgments] who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from mishpat, and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil and that they may make the fatherless their prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the storm which will come from afar?*" (Isaiah 10:1-3)

"*No one enters suit justly,*" Isaiah charges, "*and no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies....*" (Isaiah 59:4) Therefore, he says, "*your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you....*" (Isaiah 59:2) "*There is no mishpat in their paths,*" he emphasizes. (Isaiah 59:8) "*Mishpat is far from us...we look for light and behold, darkness.*" (Isaiah 59:9) "*We look for mishpat, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us....*" (Isaiah 59:11)

“Mishpat is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off; for truth has fallen in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter.” (Isaiah 59:14) And what again does Isaiah say will result? *“According to their deeds, so will He repay, wrath to His adversaries, requital to His enemies...so they will fear the name of the LORD...for He will come like a rushing stream.”* (Isaiah 59:18-19).

In anguish, Jeremiah pleads with God, asking him *“O Lord...I would speak with you concerning your justice (mishpat): Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?”* Answering his own question, Jeremiah excoriates the people and especially their leaders: *“They have become rich and powerful and have grown fat and sleek. Their evil deeds have no limit; they do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it, they do not defend the rights (mishpat) of the poor. Should I not punish them for this?” asks the LORD. ‘Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?’”* (Jer. 5:27-29) And finally the LORD has had enough: *“They have followed other gods to serve them. Both the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant I made with their forefathers. Therefore this is what the LORD says, ‘I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape.’”* (Jer. 11:10-11)

V.

Surely the craving for untrammelled liberty is strong in a potentially rational yet immature human being. Such has been the individual condition of humanity for long ages. Integral to the glorious breakthrough into collective adulthood is a willingness to humble oneself with fitting moderation and submit to the wholesome discipline and regulations which befit human dignity. Just as Israel was once punished by death, exile, and national uprooting, so in the latter days, all nations are defeated and uprooted by their own injustice and idolatry. And just as the decree of the Persian royalty returned Israel to its homeland twenty-four centuries ago, so, the prophet Isaiah proclaims, *“In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and His dwellings shall be glorious. In that day the LORD will extend His hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left, from...the nations...the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.”* (Isaiah 11:10-12).

The globally visible signal of the advent then of the global efflorescence of divine mishpat is the reassembling of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland. But the Root of Jesse: Who is he and what is his role in the drama of the latter days? Micah 2:12-13 seems to suggest he is the LORD and their king and that *“He who opens the breach will go up before them...their king will pass on before them, the LORD at their head.”* The true King, guided by God Himself, precedes Israel into the Holy land.

Historically, of course, Jesse is the father of King David, and therefore, in a sense, he is the root of the Davidic house and dynasty. God makes no secret of the unbreakable loyalty he holds for this house. In Jeremiah 33:20-21 He vows, *“If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he will not have a son to reign on his throne.”* So the one who comes to inherit the sovereignty of David is the Messiah, *“the shoot from the stump of Jesse”* (Isaiah 11:1-5) the “branch” which *“shall grow out of his roots. And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see [i.e. with partiality] or decide by what his ears hear [i.e. bias and persuasion]; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.”*

“Behold,” says Isaiah 32, *“a king will reign in righteousness (tsediqah), and princes will rule with justice (mishpat)...the fool will no more be called noble, nor the knave said to be honorable...Then mishpat will dwell in the wilderness and tsediqah abide in the fruitful field, and the effect of tsediqah will be peace (shalom), and the result of tsediqah, quietness and trust forever.”*

It is at this point that the issue of interpretation comes to a head. Broadly speaking, Christian attitudes are split between two world views. The liberal camp of Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, leans toward seeing most prophecy as a collection of allegories, a symbolic tale which holds up a grand ideal of justice, righteousness and compassion toward which believers should strive. Jesus is Lord and king largely in the sense of an example of a life worthy of emulation, a life led in pure holiness, jus-

tice, and righteousness. Justice advances incrementally as the body of believers works to infuse justice into the world.

Literalists, and many conservative Christians generally, anticipate a time when the resurrected Jesus will return bodily to the earth and establish an earthly kingdom. Living as an immortal and incorruptible body, Jesus will dwell physically on earth and as monarch of the world; assisted by his resurrected apostles, he will act as global supreme judge.

Less popular in the Christian world, but advanced by such an intellectual luminary as Martin Buber [*The Prophetic Faith* (New York and Evanston: Harper Torchbooks, 1960) pp. 138-154, 224-235], is the contention that the Messiah who will establish universal peace and justice is a Prophet, on a level with Moses, who, like Moses, will establish a new social order, a new *mishpat*, this time world-encompassing and world pacifying, and then He will depart this mortal world as have the prophets before Him, while heavenly providence upholds the integrity and potency of His *New World Mishpat*. I contend that a full appreciation of the richness of the concept of *mishpat*, discussed above and documented in Table 1, powerfully impels us toward this interpretation. Most Bahá'ís, I suspect, will be quick to grasp the significance of such an interpretation, and of its widespread acceptance, to the Bahá'í apologetic mission and proclamation effort.

In addition to the connotations of the word *mishpat*, the patterns which emerge from further Messianic prophecies tend to bolster this position and to flesh out the vision of the Messianic age and the New Mishpat. A brief survey of those passages shows us specifically the texts upon which Buber builds his scenario and which set forth the principles held in common by Biblical and Bahá'í expectation.

1) Messianic virtues are key to the New Order: “*When the oppressor is no more and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples underfoot has vanished from the land, then a throne will be established in hesed and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and who seeks mishpat and is swift to do tseDIqah.*” (Isaiah 16:4-5)

2) God’s servant, the Messiah, institutes God’s *mishpat* in the world; this is his preeminent goal: “*Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice (mishpat) to the nations (or gentiles), He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth mishpat. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established mishpat in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.*” (Isaiah 42:1-4)

3) A new *mishpat* enacted by a new Law (*torah*) will enlighten the nations of the earth: “*the torah will go out from me; my mishpat will become a light to the nations.*” (Isaiah 51:4)

4) God supports earthly Justice and Righteousness from the seat of His heavenly throne: “*The LORD is exalted; for He dwells on high [i.e. in Heaven] he will fill Zion with mishpat and tseDIqah; He will be the sure foundation of your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge.*” (Isaiah 33:5-6, NIV)

5) God’s *mishpat* will be administered by righteous human agents: “*I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the city of tseDIq, the faithful city. Zion will be redeemed with mishpat and her penitent ones with tseDIqah.*” (Isaiah 1:26-27)

6) God will spiritually inspire the human agents of the New Order: “*In that day the of LORD of Hosts will be a crown of Glory and a diadem of beauty...and a spirit of justice (mishpat) to him who sits in judgment (mishpat)... I will make mishpat the line and tseDIqah the plummet.*” (Isaiah 28:5-6, 17)

7) God himself is the supreme exemplar of *mishpat*: “*He is the rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways (d’reki) are mishpat.*” (Deuteronomy 32:4)

8) The ordered system of justice instituted by God’s servant the Messiah is centralized at the Mountain of the LORD’s temple where all nations will come to learn God’s ways (*d’reki*). The Word (*debir*) of God and the Law (*torah*) of God are sent out from Zion and international disputes will be resolved at this Temple. (Isaiah 2:1-4, Micah 4:1-5) “*In the latter days, the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains and all the nations shall flow to it that He may teach us his*

Lights of ‘Irfán

ways (*d’reki*) for out of Zion shall go forth the Law (*torah*), and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations.”

9) “The Ark of the Covenant shall not be rebuilt all nations gather to Jerusalem, the throne and the Presence of the LORD.” (Jeremiah 3:15-18)

In this context of messianic prophecy, there is no descent of angelic hosts from the physical heavens, and there is no instantaneous supernatural conquest of the physical planet. Yet there is far more than a bland evolution toward social justice, cheered on by a network of compassionate, supportive, liberal churches. Onto the stage of messianic expectation walks Bahá’u’lláh, claiming equality with Moses, with Jesus, with Muḥammad. He reveals new *torah*. He founds new institutions. He appoints new *shephatím*. He ordains a central locus of governance and pilgrimage. He establishes new standards, new customs, a New Order.

We can see clearly that no concept is quite so crucial to God’s ultimate plan for this planet as *mishpat*. About this few scholars of any faith would disagree. The challenge for Bible scholarship in a Bahá’í context is, and will continue to be, defense of the notion of a centralized, international, theonomous, covenant-bound, institutional embodiment of that ideal.

Table 1: Some Translations of Mishpat not Involving Justice Specifically

| Reference | KJV | RSV | NIV |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Gen. 40:13 | Manner | As (formerly) | As [custom] |
| Ex. 21:9 | Manner | (deal with her) | (grant her the) |
| Ex. 26:30 | Fashion | Plan | Plan |
| Num. 15:16 | Manner | Ordinance | Regulation |
| Num. 15:24 | Manner | Ordinance | Prescribed |
| Num. 29:6-39 | Manner | Ordinance | As specified; |
| Josh. 6:15 | Manner | Manner | Manner |
| Judges 13:12 | Order(v.) | Manner(of | Rule |
| Judges 18:7 | Manner(of the | Manner | Like [custom] |
| I Sam. 2:13 | (priest’s) | Custom (of the | (the) Practice |
| I Sam. 8:9, 11 | Manner (of the | The Ways (of | [Leadership] |
| I Sam. 10:25 | Manner (of the | Rights and | Regulations |
| I Sam. 27:11 | (his [David’s]) | (his) Custom | (his) Practice |
| I Kings 6:38 | Fashion | Specifications | Specifications |
| II Kings 1:7 | (What) manner | (what) kind (of | (what) kind |
| II Kings 11:14 | Manner | Custom | Custom |
| II Kings | Manner(of the | Law | (what the |
| I Chron. 6:32 | Order(n.) | Due order | Regulations |
| I Chron. 15:13 | (the due) order | The way that | The prescribed |
| I Chron. 23:31 | (according to | (according to | (in the) way |
| I Chron. 24:19 | (according to | Procedure | Regulations |
| II Chron. 4:7 | (according to | As prescribed | Specifications |
| II Chron. 4:20 | (after the) | As prescribed | As prescribed |
| II Chron. 8:14 | (according to | (according to | (following the) |
| II Chron. 30:16 | (after their) | Accustomed | Regular as |
| Ezra 3:4 | Custom | Required | prescribed |
| Neh. 8:18. | Manner | Ordinance | Regulation |
| Jeremiah 30:18 | (after the) | (Where it used | (in its proper |
| Ezekiel 11:12 | Judgments, | Ordinances | Laws, |
| Ezekiel 11:20 | Ordinances | Ordinances | Laws |
| Ezekiel 23:24 | Judgment | Judgment | Punishment |
| Ezekiel 42:11 | Fashions | Arrangements | Dimensions |

Notes

- 1) Bahá'u'lláh, Asl-i-Kullu'l-Khay (Words of Wisdom) in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1978), p. 157.
- 2) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 175.
- 3) See, for example, Weinfeld, Moshe, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, and Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).
- 4) See especially Scott, Waldron, *Bring Forth Justice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
- 5) See, for example, Peckham, Brian, *History and Prophecy* (New York, etc.: Anchor Bible Reference Library/Doubleday, 1993).
- 6) Weinfeld., pp. 35-36. Weinfeld contends that when conjoined in this way *mishpat* and *tsediqah* refer to God's specific interest in justice administered by the wealthy and powerful and aimed at the protection of the poor, weak and vulnerable. Weinfeld maintains that this conjoint meaning is also entailed by the by the complex Hebrew concept of *hesed*, sometimes translated "kindness." Interestingly, the Greek word *chrestoteti*, also translated as "kindness." is mentioned by Paul in Romans 11:22 as the quality in which the believer must diligently continue in order not to be "cut off" from the divine tree, i.e. to lose one's salvation.

