God The Perfect Judge

Described

God’s judgements refer to Him as Supreme Judge and Ruler:

- making just laws.
- making just demands over the lives of humans and other created beings.
- deciding whether the thoughts, words, actions, emotions, character and nature of a human or angel are right or wrong.
- declaring whether the angel or human is innocent or guilty.
- giving rewards and punishments.
- declaring sinful humans who receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour to be pardoned for all their past, present and future sin and to be righteous in Him on the basis of Him taking their deserved punishment of death. This is called justification by grace. It is a divine judgement based on God’s grace and mercy and on His perfect justice in punishing Christ in our place.

The Relevant Hebrew words

In the original Hebrew Old Testament, a key word is “mishpat” meaning “in various contexts: 1. judgement 2. justice, right, rectitude (a) of God. (b) of man. 3. ordinance. 4. decision of the judge in a case of law. 5. one’s (legal) right, privilege, due”. ¹ The word “ordinance” above refers to the laws of the Mosaic Covenant (see Numbers 27:11 and 35:29). According to Vine, “mishpat” means “judgement, rights...This word has two main senses; the first deals with the act of sitting as a judge, hearing a case and rendering a proper verdict. Ecclesiastes 12:14 is one such occurrence: ‘For God shall bring every work into judgement, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.’ Mishpat can also refer to rights belonging to someone (Exodus 23:6)”²

The Hebrew word “mishpat” can refer to any aspect of God’s supreme rule or government and legal judgement such as:

- the process of God’s judgement (see Psalm 143:2)
- a specific case brought before God the Supreme Ruler and Judge (see Job 13:18 and Numbers 27:5).
- the sentence or decision of God the Supreme Ruler and Judge. Deuteronomy 17:9 and 1 Kings 20:40 are human examples of this.
- the time of God’s judgement (see Psalm 1:5).
- God-given human rights (see Deuteronomy 18:3 and Jeremiah 32:7).

¹ Brown, Driver and Briggs, pages 1048-1049.
² Vine, page 126.
judgement manifested in punishments (see Deuteronomy 32:41, Jeremiah 48:21 and Ezekiel 5:8).

- the foundation of government in the sense of ultimate authority or right. Deuteronomy 1:7 stresses all “mishpat” or authority is God’s.

- justice expressed in God’s supreme government and judgement. “Mishpat” can be defined as “just judgement”. “Mishpat” also refers to God’s just laws (see Leviticus 18:4, 18:5, Numbers 36:13, Deuteronomy 4:1, 5:1 and 6:1), to His just demands and claims over all humans and other created beings and to His just absolute standards being applied by us in our lives (see Micah 6:8).

Psalm 105:7 shows that even in Old Testament times, God’s judgements were in all parts of the Earth and not just in Israel: “He is the Lord our God; His judgements are in all the earth.” 1 Chronicles 16:14 says the same.

Another key Hebrew word related to God’s judgements is “the word “shapat”. Harris, Archer and Waltke say “shapat” means “to judge, govern”. ³ “Shapat” is sometimes wrongly taken to refer only to God acting as Judge and not also as Supreme Ruler. Harris, Archer and Waltke say “the primary sense of ‘shapat’ is to exercise the processes of government. Since, however, the ancients did not always divide the functions of government, as most modern governments do, between legislative, executive and judicial functions (and departments) the common translation, ‘to judge’ misleads us”. ⁴ “Legislative” refers to the gathering together of elected or non-elected leaders with the purpose of making laws. “Executive” refers to a president or a prime minister and his cabinet or similar main leaders. “Judicial” relates to judges and courts of law. In various contexts in the Hebrew Old Testament, “shapat” is used in relation to God to refer to Him:

- being the Supreme Ruler.
- being the Supreme Judge.
- enforcing and putting into practice His laws, commands and decisions as combined Supreme Judge and Ruler. This can also involve punishing those who disobey His commands and decisions (see Isaiah 66:16) or vindicating or declaring righteous and delivering people (see Psalm 26:1 and 43:1). Isaiah 33:22 combines a number of God’s attributes: “(For the Lord is our Judge, The Lord is our Lawgiver, The Lord is our King; He will save us).”

Brown, Driver and Briggs say that as an attribute of God, “shapat” means to “judge, govern; act as law-giver, judge or governor; decide controversy; execute judgement: vindicating, condemning and punishing”. ⁵ “Shapat” is used in verses such as Genesis 16:5, 18:25, Judges 11:27, 1 Samuel 3:13 and Psalm 96:13. ⁶

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³ Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 947.
⁴ Ibid, page 947.
⁵ Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 1047.
⁶ Strong argues “shapat” should be pronounced “shaphat”.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew words meaning righteous—“sedeqah”, “sedeq”, “saddiq” and “sadaq” are paired with the Hebrew word “mishpat” in many verses. This continual pairing of the Hebrew words for “righteousness”, “righteous” and “be righteous” with the Hebrew word for “judgement” show how closely they relate to each other. The very close association between God’s righteousness and His perfect judgements is shown in Amos 5:24 when the Hebrew words “sedaqah” and “mishpat” are used in almost an interchangeable sense: “But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” “Mishpat” and “shaphat” are linked to “sedeq” in Psalm 9:4: “…You sat on the throne judging in righteousness.”

God’s Perfect Judgements Explained

There are two extremes among Christians. There are those who see God only as a God of justice and judgement. They have little, if any, understanding of His perfect love, grace and mercy towards them. There are many Christians on the other extreme who only focus on God’s love, mercy and undeserved grace. They have little understanding of His perfect justice, His total hatred of even the slightest sin and His perfect judgement. They are similar to the multitudes who belonged to the heretical “churches” of Marcion the Gnostic in the early church period.

Psalm 89:14 presents a more balanced view of God’s character: “Justice and judgement are the habitation of thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before thy face.” (K.J.V.). Here we see justice and judgement (or “mishpat” in Hebrew) are the foundation of His throne and how mercy and truth are other key aspects of His character. Psalm 33:5 speaks similarly: “He loveth righteousness and judgement: the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.” (KJV) Psalm 97:2 declares: “…righteousness and judgement are the habitation of his throne.” (KJV). In Hebrew, the word “judgement” in these latter two verses is “mishpat”.

Jeremiah 9:24 says God delights in exercising undeserved kindness, perfect judgement and righteousness: “…I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgement, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,’ says the Lord.” Isaiah 61:8 speaks similarly of God’s love of perfect judgement.

Genesis 18:25 and Zephaniah 3:5 relate God’s judgements (or “mishpat”) to His righteousness or perfect justice.

In Hebrews 6:1-2, the writer shows that teaching about eternal judgement should be one of the standard elementary teachings of all churches, not just for some select group.

Modern misunderstanding of God as Judge

In most modern societies especially democracies, judges are not also rulers. Such judges do not make laws or legislate what punishments are suitable for certain crimes. They merely judge on the basis of what political rulers have made into laws. As a result if this, many Bible-
readers misunderstand when the Scriptures refer to God as Judge. They do not realise that in a Biblical sense, God being Judge is linked to Him being the absolute Ruler of all created things. Psalm 96:10 says: “Say among the nations, “The Lord reigns; the world also is firmly established, it shall not be moved; He shall judge the peoples righteously.”

As the Perfect Judge, God is not enforcing the laws of someone else. Neither is He subject to any higher authority. He judges according to His own righteous, holy, loving, gracious and merciful character and His commands. Therefore, we need to see God as being the Perfect Judge and Supreme Ruler combined.

Psalm 9:4 demonstrates God’s perfect judgements are related to Him sitting on the Throne as Supreme Ruler: “…You sat on the throne judging in righteousness.” God’s Throne and Court-room are combined as one. God’s judgements of the rightness or wrongness of the nature, character, thoughts, words and behaviour of humans and angels are one aspect of His Supreme Rule.

The Supreme Lawgiver and Judge

James 4:12 says of God: “There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?” God’s role as Judge is here linked to His supreme authority as Lawgiver. God’s right judgements are based on His right laws. God’s Laws are written on human conscience (see Romans 2:15). The Law of Moses contained the specific relevant commandments for those living under the Mosaic Covenant. The Law of Christ or those commandments of God found in the New Testament are the relevant laws for born-again believers living under the New Covenant (see 1 Corinthians 9:21 and Galatians 6:2). These New Testament Commandments are to be obeyed by God’s grace through Jesus Christ living within us by His Spirit.

God’s laws or commandments are revealed in the Scriptures and are expressions of His perfectly holy righteous character. In John 7:21-24, Jesus stressed to the Jews that just or right judgements are based on proper interpretations of God’s Scriptures.

The true foundation for understanding God’s mercy

No one can possibly understand the enormity of God’s mercy and undeserved grace unless he first grasps how perfectly just and holy God is and how He has to judge all sin severely.

God is making judgements continually

The Bible reveals there will be a final time of perfectly just judgements made at the Great White Throne Judgement (see Revelation 20:11-15). But God is making just judgements every day. For example, God decides whether humans dying that day go to the place of punishment. Also continually God decides whether to punish each unrepentant unbeliever with earthly punishments in order to encourage them to turn from their sins to Him. Read Isaiah 26:9 in which the Hebrew word “mishpat” translated “judgements” is used: “…for when Your judgements are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”
Every violation and disobedience receives its just punishment except...

Hebrews 2:2 states: “For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward.” Here we see every violation of and disobedience to the Law of Moses ultimately in God’s time received or will receive a just punishment. In perfect justice, God should punish every disobedience and sin. The only exceptions to this are when people have their sins forgiven through Jesus Christ suffering the just punishment they deserve for these sins (see Hebrews 2:9-17).

James 2:10 says: “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.” This verse shows that if someone only disobeys one of God’s commandments, this results in the same level of guilt for him as for someone else who has disobeyed all the commandments. Galatians 3:10 states: “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’” This verse reveals even just one disobedience to one of God’s commands in the Mosaic Law results in us being under the curse of the Law. This curse is death.

Some non-churchgoers who are not born-again may think that because they have not committed what they believe is major sin, they will be accepted into heaven as righteous good people. But they are deceived! Just one minor sin is enough to condemn them to the lake of fire for eternity. This is unless they have received Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

God judges fairly

Psalm 98:9 reveals God will judge with equity or fairness: “For He is coming to judge the earth. With righteousness He shall judge the world, and the people with equity.” Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11 and Ephesians 6:9 emphasise God does not show any partiality or favouritism to anyone. Such verses refer to God’s long term judgement of each person.

In the short term, some unrepentant unbelievers may experience little if any deserved punishment for their sins. This is because of God’s undeserved grace. Such treatment may appear to others as favouritism, but is really unmerited mercy and grace. In the original Greek, the word “partiality” in Romans 2:11 and Ephesians 6:9 is “prosopolempsia” which means “to make unjust distinctions between people by treating one person better than another”.

Believers accusing God of being unjust

Ecclesiastes 8:14 states: “There is a vanity which occurs on earth, that there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous…” Ecclesiastes 7:15 says similar things: “I have seen all things in my days of vanity: There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness.” Some believers have been tempted to criticise God’s justice as a result of seeing themselves or other believers undergoing more hardship and suffering than some very wicked unbelievers. Psalm

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8 Louw and Nida, page 768.
73, Jeremiah 12:1-2, Habakkuk 1:12-2:1, Malachi 2:17 and 3:13-15 are expressions of people wrongly doubting God’s justice because of observing such seemingly unjust things.

But note Habakkuk 2:2-16 and Psalm 73:16-27 reveal that unrepentant sinners will be punished perfectly justly in future. We should never accuse God of being unjust in His giving out of punishments and undeserved gracious blessings. God often gives blessings to the wicked to help them to see His goodness in order to lead them to turn from sin to Him. Romans 2:4 refers to this.

Bible Study Questions

1. Describe what God’s judgements refer to.
2. What aspects of God’s supreme rule or government and legal judgement does the Old Testament refer to when it uses the Hebrew word “mishpat”?
3. In the Hebrew Old Testament, what does the word “shapat” mean when used in relation to God?
4. What does the continual pairing of the Hebrew word “mishpat” with any of the Hebrew words “sdaqah”, “sedeq”, “saddiq” and “sadaq” show us?
5. Explain what the following verses reveal about God’s judgements:
   a) Psalm 89:14 and 97:2
   b) Jeremiah 9:24?
6. Why is it hard for many modern people to understand that God is the Perfect Judge and Supreme Ruler combined?
7. What is the connection between God’s judgements and His laws?
8. Will God’s judgements only occur after Jesus’ Second Coming?
9. What does Hebrews 2:2 teach?