SESSION 2

"statutes and rules so righteous as all this law"

RECOVERING THE MEANING FROM RELIGIOUS JARGON.

We begin this session with a vocabulary lesson. This key verse, to our ears, sounds like it describes the fairest work of legislation in human history. In fact, some translations translate "all this law" as "body of laws," reminiscent of a constitution. But is that really what's in view? Let's break down this phrase and understand it with new categories—the categories that Ancient Hebrews used—and see what it tells us about the Suzerain's intention for his Vassal's land.

(Note: In this session we will deal with the moral law, and acknowledge that we are setting aside the ceremonial laws for the time being. Those ceremonial laws arise in relation to the tabernacle and worship, but the Ten Words and the Suzerain-Vassal treaty structure pertains to civil law.)

hoq and **mishpat** so **tsaddiq** as [all] this **torah.**

TSADDIQ

Righteousness is a word we hear often. It's also the English word that translators often use for both Mishpat as well as Tsaddiq. But what is Tsaddiq, and what is the idea uniquely expressed in the Hebrew term Tsaddiq? While the word "righteousness" has been so ladened with religiosity to the point that it's root meaning may be lost to the average English speaker, there are other English uses of the root word that could help us. Right angles are perfectly 90 degrees. When something is askew, we may say it's time to "right the ship." And, the word "right" also shares the same root as rect, as in something that stands erect, and if it's not, we must correct it.

Fun Fact: You can find this word in the name Melchizedek, meaning "my king is righteous."

Adding more confusion for modern English readers, the King James translation used the word "justified" as an alternate translation for the same Hebrew root of Tsaddiq. That was acceptable in old English, as the two words held similar and widely understood definitions. Similar parallels in our modern English can still help us grasp the Tsaddiq concept. As I type this, there are three icons on my toolbar that will "justify" my paragraph left, right, or center. If something is askew, we can adjust it. And let's not forget Goldilocks' quest for something that was "just right."

Righteousness, then, can be understood as "being aligned to a standard." Justice conveys the exact same idea, and indeed, comes from the same Hebrew word. No other nation had hoq and mishpat that were so aligned to a standard [just or righteous] as this torah that God had given Israel. We learn that Abraham was aligned to a standard when he believed God (Genesis 15:6). And, in Genesis 6, Noah alone was found to be aligned to a standard while all other mankind at the time were **rasa**—translated evil or wicked, based on the root word ra, meaning chaos—the antonym of righteousness and justice.

Righteous (adjective): Aligned to a standard.
Synonym: Just[ice]
Antonyms: Evil, Wicked, Chaos, Disorder, Wonky

My preferred antonym, however, is not found in Hebrew nor Old English. If being tsaddiq means aligning to a standard, then I prefer to call the opposite: Wonky. When things are wonky, they're disordered. When someone is wonky, they are disrupting order. Wonky relationships cause gaps, divisions, and chaos. The ancient near Eastern peoples would call that "evil."

To fully understand the antonym, though, we have to answer the question: what standard, exactly?

I'm tempted to say, "it's not clear in the text" what standard God is referring to. But, that's not accurate. It's not clear to *us*—modern, English readers with Western thought. Two phrases, "long life" and "in the land," found directly in the 5th commandment and riddled throughout Exodus, Numbers, and especially Deuteronomy, connect the idea of tsaddiq with the order created for Mankind found in Genesis 1 and 2. This order was disrupted in Genesis 3, and in response, God expelled them from the land so that they may not live long in it.

An order designed for human flourishing—that is the standard to which tsaddiq is aligned. The Western reader asks, "where is that defined?" It is defined, not explicitly, but by sharp relief against a backdrop most Western readers never see. We see the foreground—a seven-day creation narrative resulting in good, good, good, good, good, and very good. But we miss, in the background, a prevailing Ancient near-Eastern creation myth with striking similarity and differences.

In fact, we had been missing that background for thousands of years. It wasn't until 1849, when archeologists unearthed the ancient Ninevah library, that a long-lost Sumerian body of mythology was discovered. In the Enuma Elis, we find a creation myth in which seven successive periods of divine activity result in the creation of Mankind—from dust, no less—as a slave class to serve the gods' needs. To ensure this slave class does not rise up against the gods—who are neither all-powerful, ultimately immortal, nor transcendent—the gods introduce population controls such as natural disasters, pestilence, disease. And, when none of these work, a flood.[2]

Cast against this backdrop, the polemical narratives of Genesis 1-11 are set off in stark contrast. One transcendent, all-powerful Creator God ordered all creation entirely for the good of his pinnacle creation, Mankind, his image-bearing icon in the land. Mankind's fruitfulness and multiplication is not only desired, it's commanded. The countervailing threats like disease and pest (e.g. "thorns and thistles") are a direct result of Mankind disrupting this order. They are out of alignment with the standard. They are unrighteous. They are rasa—evil, wicked. Or, I prefer to say they're wonky. Ten generations after Adam, God found Noah alone to be aligned to the standard of His original order, while everyone else had become wonky, living in a chaotic, disruptive (or "evil" as our translations often render it) manner that grieved their creator.

Other discoveries from Ancient Near-Eastern mythologies lend deeper meaning to the tsaddiq intended in God's torah. Other gods not only detracted from worship of the one true God, they often represented unjust standards. Baal, for example, rose to preeminence and established dominance over his father, El, by raping his father's wife, Asherah,[3] and this kind of exertion of dominance was still accepted in Canaanite culture. The torah contains both a counternarrative in the account of Noah's son Ham uncovering his father's nakedness (Genesis 9), as well as countermanding hoq in Leviticus 18:7: "You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness." In our modern context, this example reminds us to be discerning about whether the prevailing "justice" of our culture aligns to God's standard for human flourishing, especially where sexual ethics are concerned.

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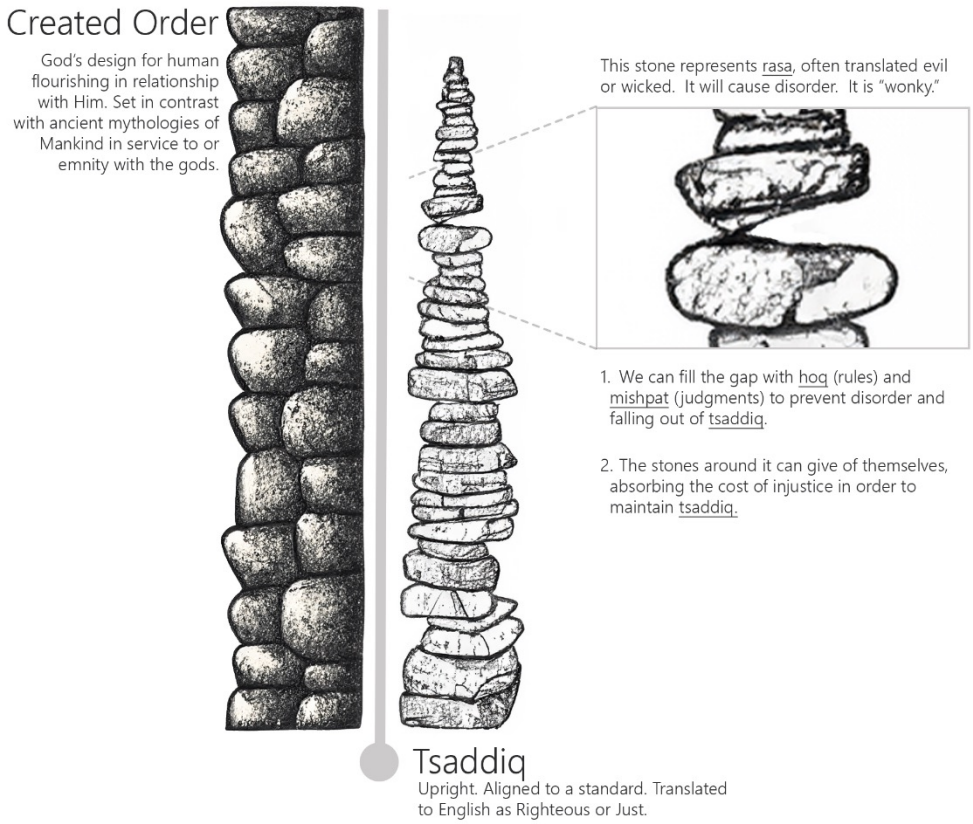
[2] In a brief paragraph, I have summarized a large body of scholarly work. My understanding of these ancient texts as applied here is largely credited to John Walton's "The Lost World of Adam and Eve" and Gordon Wenham's "Word Biblical Commentary."

[3] Albrecht Goetze, *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton University Press, 1969), page 519.



HOQ AND MISHPAT

As the people of Israel are brought to the land wherein they hope to live forever, God's covenant with them as His vassals includes not only measures of loyalty and intimacy, but also two types of torah ("instruction") that will keep them tsaddiq, and not devolve into ra. They are hoq and mishpat. Best translated as "rules" and "judgments." In the Old Testament, hoq is also regularly translated as ordinances, statutes, or precepts. And mishpat can be found behind the translation judgments, or confusingly, also as righteousness or justice. "What does the Lord require of you but to do [mishpat], love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). One way to think of these two words is that mishpat are the hoq applied.

Rules are something that we innately understand. In fact, this is probably the most common understanding when we hear the word Law. But while the law includes hoq ("rules") they are quite few compared with the mishpat ("judgments") and the narratives that envelope it all—narrative such as the creation, flood, and exodus which give context and wisdom for applying the hoq and mishpat. Taken all together, this is referred to as torah, which means "instruction." It is all this torah, including the hoq, mishpat, as well as the narratives, which God says are tsaddiq.

So, what are the hoq and the mishpat, and how do they work together? "Do not murder." That is a hoq. But immediately following the ten words in Exodus 20, chapter 21 begins, "these are the [mishpat] judgments." In the four chapters that proceed, God lays out exemplary cases for how the hoq can be applied. As we'll see in the next session, the hoq, do not murder, can be used in various mishpat varying on intentionality and premeditation. Similarly, "do not steal," is applied in the judgments that follow to all manner of damaging another person's property including negligence such as digging a pit and not covering it. Our modern laws are based on these mishpat with degrees of premeditation, manslaughter, negligence and personal liability.

CONCLUSION OF SESSION 2.

In the next session, we will look at what the Heidelberg Catechism refers to as the second table of the Ten Words—those dealing with how we ought to interact with our neighbor—as well as the judgments that follow.