

# Hebrew and Greek Words for Rewards

In the original Hebrew Old Testament the main words used in relation to God's rewards are "eqeb", "seker", "sakar", "peri", "shalam", "sub", "gemul", "gamal" and "natan". These words are usually translated as "**reward**", "**recompense**", "**requite**", "**render**" or "**repay**". The words "natan", "shalam", "sub" and "gamal" can also refer to God-given punishments.

In the context of Psalm 19:12 and Proverbs 22:4 "eqeb" means "consequence equalling gain or reward".<sup>1</sup> "Seker" means "hire, wages".<sup>2</sup> "Sakar" is defined as "hire, wages, reward for work done".<sup>3</sup> "Peri" means "fruit".<sup>4</sup> "Peri" is used in Psalm 58:11 in the sense of the God-given fruit of people's actions. "Shalam" means "requite, recompense, reward".<sup>5</sup> "Sub" means generally "return" but in those verses related to rewards, it means "requite...pay as recompense".<sup>6</sup>

"Gemul" is defined as "recompense, reward, benefit..."<sup>7</sup> "Gamal" means "to make returns of any kind, whether good or evil"<sup>8</sup> or "deal bountifully with, reward" in 2 Samuel 22:21, Psalm 13:6, 18:20, 116:7, 119:17 and 142:7 and "recompense, repay, requite" in a punishment sense in Psalm 103:10.<sup>9</sup> "Natan" means "give".<sup>10</sup>

## "Natan" has a wide variety of meanings

"Natan" can be used to refer to God giving *fully deserved rewards* (see Leviticus 26:4, Deuteronomy 11:14 and 11:15), *slightly deserved rewards* to those who have been forgiven of their sins (see 1 Kings 8:39), *punishments* (see Psalm 28:4-twice) or *undeserved gifts of grace*.<sup>11</sup>

The Abrahamic Covenant was based on the undeserved grace of God. In Genesis 13:15, 13:17, 15:7, 15:18, 17:8, 26:3 and 26:4, the Lord used the word "natan" to describe what He was giving through the Abrahamic Covenant as a totally undeserved gift. But the use of "natan" in 2 Chronicles 32:29 when cross referenced with 2 Chronicles 31:21 seems to suggest God prospered Hezekiah as a partly deserved reward. So we need to be careful when interpreting verses using "natan". Many times "natan" does not refer to a reward, but at other times it does.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 784.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 969.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 826 and Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 734.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 1022.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pages 996 and 999.

<sup>7</sup> Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 166.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, page 355.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 168.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 608.

<sup>11</sup> See Genesis 1:29, 9:3, 33:5, Deuteronomy 13:17 (in this verse, "**show**" is "natan" in Hebrew), 2 Chronicles 30:12, Psalm 84:11, 86:16, 104:11-12 and 115:16.

## **“Gemul” can relate to rewards or grace**

The Hebrew word “gemul” is used in Proverbs 12:14 in the sense of rewards from God. But note in Psalm 103:2, “gemul” is translated *“benefits”* and is used in relation to undeserved blessings given by God’s grace and mercy. These spiritual and earthly benefits are listed in verses 3 to 5. Psalm 103:2-5 says: *“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, Who satisfies your mouth with good things...”* These verses link the word “gemul” to God’s forgiveness, redemption, lovingkindness and mercies.

Forgiveness and redemption are by God’s grace alone. So the word “gemul” is not strictly always related to rewards from God.

## **A few exceptions to the general meaning of the Hebrew words**

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew words for *“reward”* in nearly every case refer to God repaying believers with earthly blessings for their service for Him. Exceptions to this are Genesis 15:1, and possibly Isaiah 40:10 and 62:11-12.

In Genesis 15:1, God said He was Abraham’s reward. Abraham had previously been a sinful idol-worshipper (see Joshua 24:2). So he did not deserve any reward from God. All he deserved was punishment. So the word *“reward”* in Genesis 15:1 is not used in the sense of something deserved or merited.

Isaiah 40:10 and 62:11 may use the word *“reward”* in the sense of the Lord’s people being His victory spoils whom He has rescued from exile and purchased or redeemed from the rule of sin.

The Hebrew words for “reward” are never used to mean salvation by grace through faith.

## **Where the words are used**

“Egeb” is used in Psalm 19:11 in relation to rewards for obeying the testimonies, statutes, commandments and judgements of the Law of the Lord. Psalm 19:8-11 states: *“The statutes of the Lord are right...The commandment of the Lord is pure...The judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether...and in keeping them there is great reward.”*

“Seker” is used in Proverbs 11:18 and “sakar” in Genesis 15:1, 2 Chronicles 15:7, Psalm 127:3, Ecclesiastes 9:5, Isaiah 40:10, 62:11 and Jeremiah 31:16. “Peri” is used in Psalm 58:11, “natan” in Leviticus 26:4, Deuteronomy 11:14 and 11:15 and “shalam” in Job 34:11, Psalm 62:12, Proverbs 11:31, 13:13 and 25:22. “Sub” is used in 1 Samuel 26:23, 2 Samuel 16:12, 22:21, 22:25, Psalm 18:20 and 18:24, and “gamal” in 2 Samuel 22:21 and Psalm 18:20.

Another Hebrew word is “maskoret” which means “reward” in Ruth 2:12 and the “wages of a servant” in Genesis 29:15, 31:7 and 31:41.<sup>12</sup> “Maskoret” is closely related to the Hebrew words “seker” and “sakar”.

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 969.

## The righteous by grace being rewarded

In Psalm 18:20 (twice), 18:24, 58:11, 1 Samuel 26:23, 2 Samuel 16:12, 22:21 (twice) and 22:25, David refers to the righteous being rewarded. In Proverbs 11:31, Solomon speaks of rewards for the righteous also. But note Romans 4:5-8 shows David understood the righteous as being those who were credited with righteousness by God's undeserved grace through faith. So when David refers to the righteous being rewarded, he is not referring to everlasting salvation being a reward. Instead he is saying the credited righteous will be rewarded for their righteous service to God.

In the above mentioned verses from Psalms, 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel, David was referring to him being rewarded with earthly blessings in only a slightly deserved sense. David could never have received fully deserved earthly rewards from God because he broke the Law by committing adultery and murder.

## The Mosaic Covenant focuses on earthly rewards

It is not clear from the Old Testament whether the previously-listed Hebrew words for rewards are used in their varying contexts in relation to rewards in heaven for believers for their service to God. But it is definite these words are used under the Mosaic Covenant to relate to *earthly* rewards for service.

Some may argue Ecclesiastes 9:5 shows the Old Testament only teaches about earthly rewards and does not refer to believers being given rewards in heaven for service to God on Earth: ***“For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.”*** But possibly Hebrews 11:26 shows Moses was one Old Testament prophet who understood about rewards after death from God. This is assuming this verse is not referring to earthly rewards under the Mosaic Covenant.

## Relevant Greek words

In the Greek New Testament, there are five words which mean similar things to the English word “reward”. These are “misthos”, “misthapodotes”, “misthapodosia”, “komizo” and “antapodosis”.

## Wages or pay for service

The first of these is “misthos” which means “pay, wages, reward or punishment”<sup>13</sup> or “a recompense based upon what a person has earned and thus deserves, the nature of the recompense being either positive or negative”.<sup>14</sup> “Misthos” is used, for example, in Matthew 5:12, 5:46, 6:1, 6:2, 6:5, 6:16,10:41 (3 times), Mark 9:41, Luke 6:23, 6:35, Acts 1:18, Romans 4:4, 1 Corinthians 3:8, 3:14, 9:17, 9:18, 1 Timothy 5:18, 2 Peter 2:13, 2 John 8, Jude 11, Revelation 11:18 and 22:12 in relation to rewards from God to believers for their post-

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<sup>13</sup> Bauer, page 523.

<sup>14</sup> Louw and Nida, page 491.

conversion service to Him. The word “misthos” is used in a natural sense in James 5:4 in relation to the *wages* that hired labourers receive.

Matthew 5:12 and Luke 6:23 use the word “misthos” when speaking of rewards or wages believers will receive in heaven from God. For example, Matthew 5:11-12 says: **“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven...”**

Revelation 22:12 uses the word “misthos” when showing that after Jesus’ Second Coming, He will reward every person according to their actions: **“And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give every one according to his work.”** Unrepentant unbelievers will receive their due “reward” of eternal punishment and believers will be rewarded for the degree they manifested Jesus Christ in their lives and for their associated faithful obedience to His will.

## God pays wages

The word “misthapodotes” meaning “rewarder, literally ‘one who pays wages’”<sup>15</sup> or “one who delivers reward or recompense (whether good or bad)”,<sup>16</sup> is used in Hebrews 11:6: **“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”** Many Christians misinterpret this verse to mean faith is a *new form of legalism* by which we can supposedly earn or deserve His grace. If something can be earned or deserved, it is no longer grace (see Romans 11:6). Grace is totally free.

*Faith is not a payment* to God for His grace. Faith is instead the means by which we humbly receive God’s grace. Faith figuratively reaches out with great thankfulness and accepts God’s offered grace through Christ.

Hebrews 11:6 teaches that God rewards those who diligently seek Him with the unstated assumption they had already previously received His promised grace through faith.

We are not saved by merely diligently seeking God. As shown in Romans 9:31-10:4, a zeal for God not founded on trusting faith in Jesus Christ does not provide salvation but is instead merely legalistic self-righteousness.

Romans 3:11 shows no human in their natural fallen state seeks after God: **“...there is none who seeks after God.”** John 6:44 reveals it is only as God draws us to Jesus Christ that we are able truly to seek Him.

The Scriptures teach we are saved by faith with an associated element of repentance (see Romans 16:7, 10:9-10, Ephesians 1:13, 2:7-9, Acts 2:38-39, 11:18, 20:21 and 26:18-20). But note Acts 17:27 shows that even if humans seek God, it is not guaranteed they will find Him fully for salvation: **“so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him...”**

Also, we cannot interpret Hebrews 11:6 contrary to Romans 4:2-4 which shows salvation is not a reward or wage for service but is a totally free unearned gift.

Hebrews 11:6 also shows that unless we have sincere faith in God, it is impossible to please Him by any of our actions. It is only because of our faith in Him that the Spirit of Christ

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<sup>15</sup> Bauer, page 523.

<sup>16</sup> Louw and Nida, page 492.

lives within us (see Galatians 3:2-5). From within us, Christ by His Spirit motivates our thoughts, words and behaviour to be pleasing to God (see Galatians 5:16, Philippians 2:13 and Hebrews 13:20-21). God will reward us for any of these thoughts, words or actions which are *centred* on *Jesus Christ* (see 1 Corinthians 3:11-15) and which are *fruits* or *results* of our *faith* in Him.

## A payment of wages

The word “misthapodosia” means “reward, literally ‘payment of wages’”.<sup>17</sup> “Misthapodosia” is derived from the words “misthos” and “apodidomi”.<sup>18</sup> The word “misthapodosia” is used of rewards in Hebrews 10:35 and 11:26 and of punishments in Hebrews 2:2.

In many contexts, the word “apodidomi” means “to recompense someone, whether positively or negatively, depending upon what the individual *deserves*”.<sup>19</sup> It is used in the context of rewards in Matthew 6:4, 6:6, 6:18, 16:27, 2 Timothy 4:14 and Revelation 18:6. Matthew 6:4 refers to rewards for giving to the needy, Matthew 6:6 for prayer and Matthew 6:18 for fasting. Matthew 16:27 refers to the rewards that will be given after Jesus’ Second Coming.<sup>20</sup>

Hebrews 2:2 shows every disobedience to the Law of Moses resulted in the doer being owed a “*reward*” or punishment: “*...and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward.*”

## “Komizo”

Another Greek word used in the New Testament in relation to God-given rewards is “komizo”. A form of “komizo” is used in 2 Corinthians 5:10 to mean “get (for oneself), receive”<sup>21</sup>: “*For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*”

## A recompense to slaves and undergirded by grace

The word “antapodosis” means “the recompense, whether positive or negative, which is given to someone on the basis of or in exchange for what someone has done”.<sup>22</sup> “Antapodosis” is used in Colossians 3:24. Colossians 3:22-24 says: “*Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.*” At

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<sup>17</sup> Bauer, page 523.

<sup>18</sup> Vine, page 513.

<sup>19</sup> Louw and Nida, page 491.

<sup>20</sup> In some contexts, “apodidomi” means simply “give away” (Bauer, page 90). Examples of these are Matthew 27:58 and Acts 4:33. In these latter examples, there is no hint of reward or recompense.

<sup>21</sup> Bauer, pages 442-443.

<sup>22</sup> Louw and Nida, page 492.

first glance, verse 24 seems to be suggesting our inheritance in Christ is a reward. But when we compare this verse to Galatians 3:18, Acts 20:32, Titus 3:7, 1 Peter 1:3-4 and 3:7, we see that our inheritance in Christ is based on pure unmerited *grace* and *mercy* and not deserved rewards.

Galatians 3:18 states: ***“For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise.”*** In this verse, Paul contrasts deserving or meriting the inheritance as a reward by obedience to the Law of Moses to receiving the inheritance on the basis of totally undeserved grace based on God’s promise through Jesus Christ. This verse shows also if our inheritance is based on rewards for our actions, then it is not based on God’s grace.

In the original Greek, the word ***“gave”*** in Galatians 3:18 is a form of the word “charizomai” which comes from the Greek word “charis” meaning “grace”. In its context in this verse, “charizomai” means “give *freely* or *graciously* as a favor” or “show oneself to be *gracious* to someone”.<sup>23</sup> So in Galatians 3:18, Paul emphasises New Covenant believers receive the inheritance by God’s undeserved grace similar to how Abraham did and not as a reward for serving God like under the Mosaic Law. Romans 4:13-16 teaches similar things.

Paul’s words in Acts 20:32 show our inheritance is based on God’s totally undeserved unmerited grace and not deserved rewards: ***“And now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”*** Titus 3:7 reveals we have become heirs of God through undeserved grace. 1 Peter 1:3-4 shows our inheritance is through the unmerited mercy of God.

The Apostle Paul would not contradict himself by saying in Galatians 3:18, Acts 20:32, Titus 3:7, 1 Peter 1:3-4 and 3:7 that our inheritance in Christ is based totally on undeserved unearned grace and then in Colossians 3:24 say it is a deserved reward. The mention of serving the Lord Jesus Christ in this latter verse shows the rewards referred to here are related to serving Him in our daily lives after conversion.

Our inheritance in Christ is received purely by God’s unmerited grace. But the rewards believers receive for serving Christ as love-slaves are *an additional feature* or *component* of our inheritance. Even though believers do not really deserve any rewards because of their sins, God still rewards them for their post-conversion service to Him. These are rewards undergirded by God’s unmerited grace.

In its original context, Colossians 3:24 refers to believers who were slaves of human masters being rewarded by Jesus Christ their heavenly Master. The inference to these slaves was: even though you will probably not be receiving great financial blessings and material wealth as rewards or wages for serving your human masters, you will obtain rewards in your next life from your heavenly Master.

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<sup>23</sup> Bauer, page 876-877.