

## Are there different words used in the Bible for sin and how does this impact our understanding of salvation?

There are three primary English words used in the Old Testament to describe sin: 1) sin, 2) iniquity, and 3) transgression.

In this study, we will explore only the Hebrew words in the OT.

### ***Chata' (khaw·taw) v.; the noun form is chatta'ah (khat·taw·aw)***

The Hebrew word *khata'* appears 238 times in the OT and is most commonly translated as “sin” (188 times).

*Chata'* means “to fail” or “to miss the goal or path of right and duty,” or to “miss the mark.” It also means “to miss oneself, lose oneself, wander from the way.”

After giving the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, Moses told the people not to be afraid.

*(Exodus 20:20) And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin (verb).”*

- This “sin” likely has the connotation of wandering from the right path.

Concerning the golden calf incident:

*(Exodus 32:30–32)<sup>30</sup> Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin (phrase includes verb and noun). So now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”<sup>31</sup> Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Oh, these people have committed a great sin (same), and have made for themselves a god of gold!<sup>32</sup> Yet now, if You will forgive their sin (noun)—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.”*

It also has the connotation of purifying or cleansing (19 times):

*(Numbers 8:21) And the Levites purified (verb) themselves and washed their clothes; then Aaron presented them like a wave offering before the LORD, and Aaron made atonement for them to cleanse them.*

- This is a second definition for *chata'* as it denotes the cleansing from sin rather than the commission of sin.

When God creates humanity in his divine image, he sets the standard, the goal to reach for. To be created in the image of God suggests that humanity’s most perfect nature is divine love. Living with love for God and one another and all creation is our primary objective. Choosing not to love invites corruption into the goodness of creation, so it is “*chata,*” or sin.

### ***Avon (aw·vone) n.***

The Hebrew word *avon* is another word for sin, speaking to our immoral nature that manifests in sinful acts. It's translated as "iniquity" 220 out of 230 times, meaning "perversity, depravity, or guilt" (both for wrongs committed and nature inherited).

The flavor of the word entails crookedness, as in a twisted or crooked road:

*(Lamentations 3:9) He has blocked my ways with hewn stone; He has made my paths crooked.*

*(Psalm 38:6) I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long.*

*Avon* is about the distortion of what was otherwise beautiful and good. The authors use it at times to refer to behaviors like murder or adultery. Examples of morally twisted behavior include deceitfulness and violence.

The word *avon* is not limited to the inherited nature sinners possess. God intends us to confess our "iniquities" (plural) endeavoring to overcome our inherited tendencies by trusting in Him.

*(Job 13:23) How many are my iniquities and sins? Make me know my transgression and my sin.*

*(Psalm 51:9–10)<sup>9</sup> Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

- *Avon* is sin that comes from a heart that has been corrupted at a deeper level than *chata'*. It's more twisted, more serious in nature.

Speaking of Solomon before he is born:

*(2 Samuel 7:12–14)<sup>12</sup> "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom."<sup>13</sup> He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.<sup>14</sup> I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men.*

- God says that "if" Solomon commits an *avon*, not that he is *avon*.
- Iniquity can be overcome by the grace of God whether it comes from inherited tendencies or cultivated propensities to sin.

### ***Pesha (peh-shah) n.***

The Bible describes sin's relational consequences using the Hebrew word *pesha*, translated as "transgression" 84 out of 93 times. It refers to "rebellion" that comes out of a defiant spirit, and often against people that a person knows or has a relationship with.

*Pesha* refers to the violation of trust, like betrayal or even outright betrayal against a friend.

*(Genesis 50:15–17)<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him."<sup>16</sup> So they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, "Before your father died he commanded, saying,<sup>17</sup> 'Thus you shall say to Joseph: 'I beg*

*you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.’ Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.*

*(Psalm 19:1) Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression.*

*(Ezekiel 18:30–32)<sup>30</sup> “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord God. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. <sup>31</sup> Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? <sup>32</sup> For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!”*

### **Used Together**

Sometimes there are mentioned together in the same passage, as in this one when the Lord proclaimed His name to Moses:

*(Exodus 34:6–7)<sup>6</sup> And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, <sup>7</sup> keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.”*

*(Psalm 51:1–2)<sup>1</sup> Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin.*

- The writer is referencing the breadth of sin in all its forms.

All sin flows out of human beings that “fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Regardless of the word that is used to describe sin, the impact is the same. We need Jesus Christ to deliver us from all of them, whether missing the mark, acts of perversity from cultivated moral depravity, or hurtful rebellious sins in our hurtful betrayal of trust.

### **The Law of God**

There is another angle here too, one that involves elements of literary creativity. Here’s an example.

There are many words used to describe God’s law:

- Law
- Commandments
- Statutes
- Precepts
- Testimonies
- Judgments

These words are often used interchangeably throughout the OT. The words overlap in meaning, but each provides a nuanced perspective on God’s authority.

This is one example of literary technique allowing the author to avoid being repetitive while expressing truth through expansive language.

In a similar way, Bible authors can do the same by using different words for sin. While it's helpful to know the different meanings, we should not read too much into it. Every kind of sin is destructive to our relationship with God and others.

### **How does this impact our understanding of salvation?**

Our salvation in Christ is full and complete. When we first believe, we are delivered from the penalty of sin for the assurance of eternal life. As we walk with Christ, we are delivered from the power of sin as God transforms our sinful nature into new desires for righteousness.

*(1 John 1:5–7)<sup>5</sup> This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. <sup>7</sup> But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from ALL sin.*

*(1 John 3:5–9)<sup>5</sup> And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup> Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. <sup>7</sup> Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. <sup>8</sup> He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.*

Only at the second coming is our flesh delivered from the presence of sin.

*(1 Corinthians 15:51–52)<sup>51</sup> Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—<sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*

You could say that we first receive a new sanctified nature, then a new physical body without any traces of sin.

*(Revelation 21:4–5)<sup>4</sup> And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”<sup>5</sup> Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”*

**[Segue into the next question about “high-handed” sins.]**