

Segullah: From Trash to Treasure and Back Again

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הַלְּגֻלָּה], *segullāh*, is used only eight times in the Hebrew Bible (Ex 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps 135:4; 1 Chr 29:3; Eccles 2:8; Mal 3:17). Yet, in spite of its limited usage, it is a key term for understanding the privileges and responsibilities that God gave to Israel and the Church with regard to their mission in the world. The Septuagint uses two Greek synonyms to translate this one Hebrew word. The New Testament uses these two Greek words six times (nine times if one counts the verb form). Yet, only four times do English translations reflect the Hebrew word behind the Greek (Acts 20:28; Eph 1:14; Tit 2:14; and 1 Pet 2:9). I argue that the other three references (Heb 10:39; 1 Thess 5:9; and 2 Thess 2:14) should also reflect the Hebrew word.

For convenience sake we will refer to the word in an adapted transliteration: *segullah*. Our approach will be to do a word study for the Hebrew Scriptures, analyze how the Septuagint (LXX) translated *segullah*, and then note how each New Testament passage should be understood with *segullah* as the background to the Greek words.

Segullah in the Hebrew Scriptures

The literal use of the word is found in two late passages. In 1 Chr 29:3 David recounts how he is giving part of his personal treasure to the accumulation of materials for the temple that his son Solomon will build: “Besides, in my devotion to the temple of my God I now give my personal treasures (*segullah*) of gold and silver for the temple of my God, over and above everything I have provided for this holy temple.” *Segullah* refers to the king’s personal cache of precious gold and silver, apparently collected over a period of years of conquests and perhaps trade (see 2 Sam 8:11). In Eccles 2:8a the “son

of David” (Solomon?) says: “I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure (*segullah*) of kings and provinces.” Silver and gold is in apposition to the word *segullah*. It is a king’s most prized treasure.

These two literal usages accord with the same word found in Akkadian and Ugarit. “In Akkadian legal documents, *sikiltu* refers to movable goods that a person has ‘acquired’ (*sakālu*) either justly or unjustly, or that a person has put aside.”¹ The Akkadian word, *sakalu*, means “to acquire property” and *sikiltum*, means “personal property.” A royal seal ascribes to King Abban the epithets “servant of Haddus, favorite of Haddus, most personal property [*sikiltum*] of the la[dy]?”² In Ugarit the last Hittite suzerain writes a letter to his vassal to remind him that he is “his servant [and] his property [*sglth*].”³ This usage is very close to the metaphorical use of *segullah* in the remainder of the Hebrew passages. “Thus *segullah* comes to mean a dear personal possession, a ‘treasure’ only in the sense of that which is treasured or cherished.”⁴

God said to Moses at the foot of Mt. Sinai—“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession [*segullah*]. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:5-6). Israel is viewed as “Yahweh’s personal possession, not through inheritance, but rather through the putting aside of a reserve from the possessions of the Most High. . . . This kind of acquired possession is valued more highly, and the word ultimately becomes the designation for any possession that one especially values.”⁵

¹ E. Lipiński, article on *segullah* in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, Vol. X, translated by Douglas W. Stott, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 145. See pp. 144-148 for entire article.

² Ibid., p. 146.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Moshe Greenberg, “Hebrew *segullah* : Akkadian *sikiltu*,” *JAOS* 71 (1951): 174.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 147, 148.

Israel, as a “treasured possession,” must be holy in order to be a “kingdom of priests” to the world. Israel had been “slaves” in Egypt. By cultural standards they had been nothing but “trash,” yet God rescued them from Egyptian slavery and brought them to the foot of Mount Sinai, to Himself, and there gave them the status of “special treasure.”

The word appears in Deuteronomy in three strategic verses. Deuteronomy 7:6 is in the context of God’s instructions concerning the conquest and the destruction of the wicked Canaanites (Deut 7:1-5): “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession [*segullah*].” As in Exodus, the people are chosen by God and they are to be holy. They have not been chosen because they are a great nation, for they are few in number by comparison (Deut 7:7). Nor have they been set apart as holy because they are an obedient people (Deut 9). It is because God is a covenant-keeping God and faithful to his promises (Deut 7:8, 9).

Deuteronomy 14:2 is set in a context of detestable pagan practices that the Israelites are to avoid: “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession [*segullah*].” Again, the ideas of being chosen, holy, avoiding evil, and obedience are found in the context. They were to remember that they had moved from being “trash to treasure.”

Finally, Deut 26:18 is at the end of the stipulations (Deut 5-26), before the ratification with curses and blessings (Deut 27-28): “And the LORD has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession [*segullah*] as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands.” We must remember that Moses is addressing a new

generation emerging out of the desert to conquer the Promised Land. The “old” rebellious generation had died in the wilderness. By grumbling against God and Moses they maintained their status as “trash,” only to be thrown away in the desert! Besides emphasizing obedience as part of being God’s *segullah*, Moses adds: “He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised” (Deut 26:19). Besides the responsibilities of obedience and being holy, there are privileges of “praise, fame and honor” given to the new generation.

Only one prophet, Malachi, used the word—“‘They will be mine,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘in the day when I make up my treasured possession [*segullah*]. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him’” (Mal 3:17). The context suggests that the few who fear Yahweh (Mal 3:16) will at least be part of this new “rich treasure” of God, a group of people who will righteously serve him in the future (see Mal 3:18-4:5). But first “Elijah” must come to usher in that “day of the LORD” when God will make up his “new” *segullah*!

In Ps 135:4 the term *segullah* is used in parallel with “chosen” (as in Deut 7:6). The whole context of Ps 135 touches on all the contexts we have seen above—that Israel is special above the pagan nations and their gods (vv. 5, 15-18), for Israel’s God is the Creator and Sovereign over the earth (vv. 6-7). He has saved his people from slavery, struck down great kings, and given them land as an inheritance (vv. 8-12). This is why, as God’s *segullah*, the people praise and bless his name (vv. 1-3, 19-21).

Thus, in summary, *segullah* is used in similar ways in Hebrew as it was in other languages such as Akkadian and Ugarit—a covenant context with kingdom servants

involved as a chosen treasure. Before we examine its New Testament use, we must first see how the Septuagint (LXX) translated the word *segullah*.

The Septuagint Translation of *Segullah*

There are basically two Greek words used to translate *segullah* in the Hebrew Bible. They are synonyms for the idea of “possession,” “treasured possession,” “rich treasure,” or “most-prized treasure.” *Periouvsiō~*, *periousios*, or a form of it is used most often (seven times), while *peripoihvsī~*, *peripoiēsis*, and its verb form is used only twice. Interestingly, the usage of these two synonyms will be reversed in the New Testament.

The word, *periousiasmo;~*, *periousiasmos*, “private possession,” is found in Ps 134:4 LXX (135:4 Hebrew/English) and Eccles 2:8. A similar word, *periovsiō~*, *periousios*, “rich treasure, that which is over and above, surplus, abundance, having more than enough, wealthy” is found five times: Ex 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; and Ex 23:22. The latter reference is not based on *segullah* in the Hebrew text. It seems the Septuagint has inserted a similar phrase from Ex 19:5, 6 into Ex 23:22. In 1 Chr 29:3 the Septuagint has used a verb form, *peripoievomai*, *peripoieomai*, “keep safe, preserve, cause to remain over and above,” to translate *segullah*. The same word is used in Isa 43:21, but *segullah* is not in the Hebrew text. (However, 1 Pet 2:9 uses the last phrase of this verse in its quote of Ex 19:5, 6—“that they may proclaim my praise.”) Finally, the noun form of the verb above, *peripoihvsī~*, *peripoiēsis*, “keeping safe, preservation, gaining possession of, and acquisition” is found in Mal 3:17.

The New Testament References

These two Greek words are used six times in the New Testament. The most used word in the Septuagint is used only once—Tit 2:14—“who gave himself for us to redeem

us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own [lao;n periouvsion, *laon periousion*], eager to do what is good.” “By Jesus’ work of redemption God has created for Himself a people which are for Him a costly possession, a choice treasure.”⁶ The other five references use the word peripoivhsi~, *peripoiēsis* (1 Pet 2:9; Eph 1:14; Heb 10:39; 1 Thess 5:9; and 2 Thess 2:14). The verb form of this noun is found three times in the New Testament (cf. Lk 17:33; Acts 20:28; and 1 Tim 3:13), but only Acts 20:28 has a possible connection to the concept of *segullah*: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought (periepoihsato, *periepoiēsato*) with his own blood.” The Church is viewed as “purchased” by the blood of Jesus—a most expensive price indeed!

1 Pet 2:9—“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God [lao;~ eij~ peripoivhsin, *laos eis peripoiēsīn*], that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” It is certain that Peter is referring to Ex 19:5, 6 for this paraphrase. But he uses peripoivhsi~, *peripoiesis*, rather than the Septuagint’s periouvsio~, *periousios* (The original LXX phrase occurs in Tit 2:14.). Just as Ps 135:4 uses the word “chosen” as a parallel with *segullah*, so Peter sandwiches the two middle words (“a royal priesthood, a holy nation”) between “chosen people” and “a people belonging to God,” i.e., *segullah*. He also alludes to Isa 43:21 (LXX only) for his last phrase—“that you may declare the praises of him”—which uses the verb form peripepoievomai, *peripepoieomai* (as we noted above). Also quoting from Hosea (Hos 1:9, 10; 2:23), Peter reminds his Gentile Christians that once

⁶ H. Preisker, article on *periousios* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by G. Friedrich, Volume VI, translated by G.W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 58. See pp. 57-58 for the article.

they were *not a people* but now they are the people of God (1 Pet 2:10a). This is even stronger than saying: “Once they were ‘trash’ but now they are God’s ‘treasure.’” The NIV translation, “a people belonging to God” is quite weak. A stronger translation is needed, something like: “a people for [God’s] crown jewel” or “most prized treasure.”

Eph 1:14—“who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession [th'~ peripoihvsew~, *tēs peripoiēseōs*]
—to the praise of his glory.” The ultimate goal of God in his great scheme of redemption is the salvation of his crown jewel, the Church! All of creation awaits the Church’s salvation (see Rom 8:19), for all of creation will be renewed (recreated?) at the second coming of Jesus.

Heb 10:39—“But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved [eij~ peripoivhsin yuch'~, *eis peripoiēsin psūchēs*].” Where is the word for *segullah* in the English? The noun, peripoivhsi~, *peripoiēsis*, has been translated in the NIV as a verb, “are saved.” Perhaps in a literal sense it should have been translated: “unto a preservation of the soul, i.e., life.” While this is possible, I will suggest a better approach.

Several years ago while teaching this word study to a Bible School class of young adults in Pittsburg, I registered my consternation as to how to understand this particular reference. A young lady who was studying ancient metallurgy at the university reminded me of the context and how that context helps interpret the imagery of purifying precious metals. The author of Hebrews reminds his readers they have only lost their “real estate,” non-movable treasure (v. 34) and they had more “lasting possessions” than that. Jesus is our model of one who did not “shrink back” but held firmly to the task of living by faith[fullness] (vv. 35-38, quoting Hab 2:3, 4). Therefore, the biblical writer says: “But

we are not of [those who are] shrinking back unto destruction, but of [those who are] faithful unto a living treasure” (my translation). In the process of purifying precious metals (such as silver or gold), the dross under a very hot fire rises to the top and shrinks back to the sides of the cauldron. The purified metal (silver or gold?) is then poured out for safe-keeping, while the dross (the trash!) is scraped off the sides of the cauldron and thrown away. This is the imagery of the verse. We may lose our property to persecution, but through this “purification process” (the testing of “fire”), we who are faithful (firm throughout) become a *living* (movable) treasure to God. One day we will be “richly rewarded” (v. 35b).

Peripoivhsi~, *peripoiēsis*, is used in 1 Thess 5:9 and 2 Thess 2:14, but in these two references (according to the NIV) the noun in question is turned into a verb (active meaning rather than intransitive) with an object in the genitive case (usually the genitive case describes something, but it can function as the object of a verb). 1 Thess 5:9—“For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation” [[eij~ peripoivhsin swthriva~, *eis peripoiēsin sōtērias*] through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Our word is translated “to receive” and its object (“salvation”) is in the genitive case, which in a literal translation would read: “unto a possession of salvation.” The context and structure of this verse reminds one of Heb 10:39. I suggest the following: “For God did not appoint us unto wrath but unto a saved treasure.” The very next verse (v. 10) explains how we have become a “saved treasure” to God—by the death of his Son (cp. Acts 20:28)! Perhaps a linguistic theory approach will not allow us to translate it this way, but I make the suggestion strongly. My suggestion is looking at the word peripoivhsi”, *peripoiēsis*, intransitively rather than actively governing a genitive. The intransitive sense is

preferable using the genitives as “adjectives,” describing the quality of the noun before it. Lightfoot seems to favor this approach for both Thessalonian passages because of “the almost technical sense which the words *peripoieisqai*, *peripoivhsi*” bear in the New Testament.”⁷

2 Thess 2:14—“He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory [*ejj~ peripoivhsin dovxh~*, *eis peripoiēsin doxēs*] of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Our word is translated in the NIV “share in” with the object as “glory.” However, the context has some of the same ideas and structure as we have seen in the certain passages for *segullah*: “God chose you” (v. 13). I suggest the translation: “Unto which he called you through our gospel, [that you may be] for a glorious treasure of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Again, linguistic analysis may not allow us to translate the Greek so literally or stilted, but nevertheless, I make the suggestion.⁸ Selwyn promoted as a translation for the Thessalonian passages in question: “for a redemptive possession” and “for our Lord’s glorious possession.”⁹ I have used the stronger phrases: “saved treasure” and “glorious treasure.”

While 1 Thess 5:9, 2 Thess 2:14, and Heb 10:39 are questionable references to the use of the Old Testament concept of *segullah* according to most English translations, there is no question about Eph 1:14, Tit 2:14, and 1 Pet 2:9. I now propose that the first three references also refer to the concept of *segullah*. The Church is called by God to be

⁷ Lightfoot is quoted by E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, (London: Macmillan & Co., 1964), p. 167.

⁸ I do not agree with the translations presented by the article on *peripoievomai*, *peripoieomai*, in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, editor, Colin Brown, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 839. The readings follow the RSV and NRSV. The verses affected are: Eph 1:14, 1 Thess 5:9, 2 Thess 2:14, Heb 10:39. *Segullah* does not seem to be the basis for translating *peripoivhsi~*, *peripoiēsis*, in these verses. Instead, the nouns are translated in an “active” sense with the genitive as an object of the action.

⁹ Selwyn, *St. Peter*, p. 167.

his *segullah* people, his crown jewel, most prized treasure. They are “chosen,” called to be a “kingdom of priests,” a “holy nation.” They have the indwelling Spirit that enables them to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions and to say “Yes” to self-controlled, upright and godly lives. God’s *segullah* people are eager to do what is right. They live this way as they wait for the day of redemption—to the praise of God’s glory! They are a “saved” and “glorious” treasure to God. They have been transformed from “trash” to “treasure.”

There is no greater privilege than to be called God’s *segullah*—his most prized treasure. On the other hand, there is no greater responsibility involved because the witness to the one true God is at stake. We are mediators between a world ready for destruction and the God who is waiting to “add” to his “treasured people.” We have been made “God’s most-prized treasure,” taken from the “trash bins of the world,” but now we have been sent back into the very trash we came from in order to bring more people, all the peoples of the world, to God in order that He might indeed make them his “most-prized treasure”—His *Segullah* People!