

A deep dive into Genesis 2:15

Translations will be in ESV unless specified

Put together by Nathan Strecker

Original verse:

ESV

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to [work it](#) and [keep it](#).

NIV

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to [work it](#) and [take care of it](#).

NLT

The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden [to tend](#) and [watch over it](#).

These two Hebrew words are Hbda and Smr. They are used commonly throughout the Old Testament. ESV translates them in many ways. These different uses help us better understand what it is that humans are made to do.

Hbda: To work, serve, labor

- Genesis 3:23 “therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden [to work](#) the ground from which he was taken.”

We can see that the task of working the ground continues even after banishment from the garden

- Exodus 5:18 “Go now and [work](#). No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks.””

The work is not just limited to farming the ground. All types of labor.

- Exodus 34:21 ““Six days you shall [work](#), but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.””

We can see this word is meant for all types of labor, but it evolves further to describe PEOPLE who do work.

- Exodus 1:13 “So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel [work as slaves](#)”
- Jeremiah 25:14 “For many nations and great kings [shall make slaves](#) even of them, and I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.”
- Genesis 4:2 “And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain [a worker](#) of the ground.”
- Ecclesiastes 5:12 “Sweet is the sleep of [a laborer](#), whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.”

This word was also used to describe the work that needed to be done in the tabernacle.

- Numbers 16:9 “is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, [to do](#) service in the tabernacle of the LORD and to stand before the congregation to minister to them,”
- Numbers 18:23 “But the Levites [shall do](#) the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, and among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance.”

This act of serving is even translated as worship (though it is not the primary word for worship).

- 2 Samuel 15:8 “For your servant vowed a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram, saying, ‘If the LORD will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then [I will offer worship](#) to the LORD.’ ”
- 2 Kings 10:19 “Now therefore call to me all the prophets of Baal, all his [worshippers](#) and all his priests. Let none be missing, for I have a great sacrifice to offer to Baal. Whoever is missing shall not live.” But Jehu did it with cunning in order to destroy the [worshippers](#) of Baal.”

Note that the worship could be given to the LORD or to false gods like Baal. This is most clearly seen in the final way this word is translated; serve. Serve is the primary way that Hbda is translated (almost ¾ of uses).

- Genesis 29:18 “Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will [serve](#) you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”
- Exodus 10:24 “Then Pharaoh called Moses and said, “Go, [serve](#) the LORD; your little ones also may go with you; only let your flocks and your herds remain behind.””
- Numbers 8:25 “And from the age of fifty years they shall withdraw from the duty of the service and [serve](#) no more.”

- Deuteronomy 10:12 “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to [serve](#) the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,”
- Judges 2:13 “They abandoned the LORD and [served](#) the Baals and the Ashtaroth.”
- Malachi 3:18 “Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who [serves](#) God and one who does not [serve](#) him.”

Note how this one word goes from being about farming the ground to obedience to God.

Smr: Watch, guard, observe, keep

This word is used over 450 times and translated in many different ways. Let’s start with Guard.

- Genesis 3:24 “He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to [guard](#) the way to the tree of life.”
- Exodus 23:20 “Behold, I send an angel before you to [guard](#) you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.”
- Joshua 10:18 “And Joshua said, “Roll large stones against the mouth of the cave and set men by it to [guard](#) them,”

Like the last word, this even goes on to describe the PEOPLE who are doing the guarding.

- Song of Songs 3:3 “The [watchmen](#) found me as they went about in the city. “Have you seen him whom my soul loves?””
- Isaiah 62:6 “ On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set [watchmen](#); all the day and all the night they shall never be silent. You who put the LORD in remembrance, take no rest,”

It’s also translated as Watch or Keep Watch.

- Nehemiah 11:19 “The gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon and their brothers, [who kept watch](#) at the gates, were 172.”
- Job 14:16 “For then you would number my steps; you would not [keep watch](#) over my sin;”

Finally, Smr is primarily translated as just Keep, as we see in the ESV translation of Genesis 2:15. It’s translated this way 40% of the time.

- Genesis 17:9 “And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you [shall keep](#) my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.”
- Exodus 16:28 “And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to [keep](#) my commandments and my laws?”
- Exodus 31:13 “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall [keep](#) my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.”
- Numbers 1:53 “But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel. And the Levites shall [keep](#) guard over the tabernacle of the testimony.
- Numbers 6:24 “The LORD bless you and [keep](#) you;”
- Deuteronomy 11:1 “You shall therefore love the LORD your God and [keep](#) his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always.”
- Nehemiah 1:5 “And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who [keeps](#) covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and [keep](#) his commandments,”
- Malachi 2:9 “and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not [keep](#) my ways but show partiality in your instruction.”
- Other fun facts. Psalm 119 uses “keep” 17 times.

Note how this one word goes from being about watching over your garden to obedience to God.

Observations

Both words are used as actions that Man must do in the garden.

They are then reused right after the curse comes into play (Genesis 3:23-24).

Both words are used to describes tasks done by the Priests as they tend to the tabernacle, because the tabernacle was supposed to be their mobile garden of Eden.

Both words are used to describe obedience to God. Serve the LORD and keep his commands. Because that is what it means to be in Eden, to follow God. And when humans first disobeyed God, they were banished from the garden.

Both of these words are used in the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi. Highlighting their use throughout scripture and how it was an important theme.