



Sahala in Batak Toba Tradition and its Relevance for Understanding Biblical Blessing

Roymandani Manurung^{1*}, Endiko Saragih², Sebastian Silitonga³, Stiven Jonatan Damanik⁴, Maria Juniansi Vania Pakpahan⁵, Riris Johanna Siagian⁶

Sekolah Tinggi Teologi HKBP Pematangsiantar

Corresponding Author: Roymandani Manurung dolimanurung1301@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Batak Toba, Blessing, Bible, Cultural Context, Contextual Theology

Received : 04, June
Revised : 06, July
Accepted : 08, August

©2025 Manurung, Saragih, Silitonga, Damanik, Pakpahan, Siagian: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Atribusi 4.0 Internasional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the meaning and function of the sahala concept within the Batak Toba community tradition while exploring its relevance to the understanding of blessing from a biblical perspective. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach and a literature study method, the author analyzes sahala as an entity that reflects power, authority, and glory bestowed by ancestors or supernatural forces, as well as its role within the social structure and spiritual life of the Batak Toba community. The findings indicate that sahala is not merely a symbol of status but is closely tied to the relational dynamics between humans, ancestors, and the divine. Within the context of Christian theology, this concept shares similar values with the biblical understanding of blessing, which encompasses relational aspects, responsibility, and the realization of God's will in human life.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a fundamental aspect of human life, guiding individuals toward an understanding of God, the universe, and their own existence. Each religion, through its teachings and practices, offers a profound worldview and guidelines that help individuals navigate their daily lives. One central concept in many religious traditions is blessing, which, in various contexts, is understood as a gift from God that brings goodness, salvation, and well-being. Blessing, in this sense, does not only encompass material or worldly aspects but, more deeply, includes spiritual blessings that connect individuals with God while providing direction and meaning in life. In Christianity, blessing is often understood as God's grace given to His people, which includes grace, the forgiveness of sins, and salvation received through faith in Jesus Christ. This blessing serves as a sign of God's love and presence in the lives of His people, transforming their perspectives toward the world and others. However, the way each community perceives and lives out this blessing is deeply influenced by the local culture and traditions they uphold.

The Batak Toba community, with its rich cultural heritage and customs, also has its unique way of understanding and experiencing blessing. Within Batak tradition, blessing is often understood in the context of a close relationship between humans, nature, and divine forces. In daily life, various traditional ceremonies, symbols, and prayers practiced by the Batak Toba people carry profound spiritual meanings that reflect their understanding of how God works in their lives. However, with the arrival of Christianity within the Batak Toba culture, new challenges have emerged in interpreting the concept of blessing. Christian teachings, which emphasize a view of blessing centered on a personal relationship with God, grace, and salvation, often intersect or even clash with the more collective values of Batak culture that are tied to social relationships within the community. In this regard, it becomes important to explore how the biblical concept of blessing can be received and understood within the context of Batak tradition without

disregarding the theological values inherent in Christian teachings. This paper aims to examine how sahala, which serves as a symbol of power and authority within Batak Toba culture, can be connected to or interpreted in light of the concept of blessing as described in the Bible, particularly concerning the spiritual and material blessings that come from God.

METHODS

The research method employed in the writing of this scholarly article adopts a qualitative approach based on a literature study. This approach aims to explore an in-depth understanding of existing cultural and theological phenomena by emphasizing the interpretation and analysis of data in a narrative and descriptive manner. The qualitative method itself is an approach used to understand social or cultural phenomena in a profound and contextual way, rather than through statistical measurement or calculation. Meanwhile, the literature study is a method that relies on written sources to obtain relevant information. In this research, the literature study serves as the primary tool to explore works that discuss Batak Toba traditions, particularly regarding sahala, as well as theological writings that address the concept of blessing in the Bible. These written sources will be analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and connections between the traditional values of the Batak Toba and Christian teachings concerning blessing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding and Function of Sahala in Batak Toba Tradition

Sahala in Batak Toba tradition is considered the core of the highest reality within religious life that can be attained by a believer. This concept represents the pinnacle of spiritual achievement, as sahala is formed through the process of internalizing God into daily life, resulting in an individual's obedience to the divine power within themselves. Sahala refers to the character, spirituality, and qualities possessed by a person. When these aspects are strong within an individual, that person will be recognized as having character or marsahala. The

greater a person's sahala, the greater their character or charisma will be. The charisma associated with sahala is closely linked to individual behavior and the conscious effort to create sacred space within oneself through contemplation a deep self-awareness aimed at shaping the surrounding world. The key to all of this lies in the commitment to develop the energy (spirit and soul) within oneself. Contemplation, in this context, refers to the effort to enter into oneself and to provide a spacious place within the heart to reflect on matters related to divine values or things considered sacred.

The concept of sahala in Batak Toba tradition is a spiritual value closely tied to the Batak cosmological and religious understanding. Within this framework, human beings are seen as part of *kayangan*, the dwelling place of *Mulajadi na Bolon* (the Creator God), who were initially united with the Creator before falling into sin and being placed in the Middle and Lower Realms. *Sahala* emerges as an expression of awe, reverence, and spirituality arising from the experience of the power and holiness of *Mulajadi na Bolon*. It represents a fusion of spirituality and personal qualities that shape a person's character. In this sense, *sahala* is not merely charisma but is a spiritual strength that shines within a person due to the balance between body, spirit, and soul (*tondi*). A person who possesses *sahala* (*marsahala*) is one who is aware of their identity as a theological and social being, living in harmonious relationships both vertically (with God) and horizontally (with others), while submitting to *dohot uhum ni habatahon*, the laws and customs established by *Mulajadi na Bolon*.

The Batak Toba community holds a profound view of life after death, which is reflected in their various expressions and beliefs. One such belief is the idea that although a person has died, their spirit, or *tondi*, continues to exist and can interact with those who are still living. *Tondi* itself is understood as the force that animates the body and can be possessed by living humans, the deceased, as well as other beings such as plants and animals. Meanwhile, *sahala* is considered a form of *tondi*'s power, accompanying descendants with intelligence,

knowledge, and talents. This *sahala* is also believed to be transferable to the body of another person, creating a connection between the living and the deceased. The Batak Toba people hold great respect for the spirits of their ancestors, as they believe that the spirits of the deceased continue to maintain a relationship with their living family members. This belief is reflected in various traditional ceremonies such as *manulangi*, *hamatean*, *mangongkal holi*, the erection of memorial monuments (*tugu*), and annual feasts held at these monuments. According to their beliefs, the care and remembrance of ancestral heritage play a crucial role in determining the position of their spirits in the afterlife. The Batak Toba community also believes that the spirits of the deceased can bring either blessings or misfortune to the living, depending on how they are honored.

In a broader and contextual understanding, *sahala* within Batak tradition is not only interpreted as a spiritual power sourced from one's relationship with the divine but also as a form of social and cultural recognition of the quality of life of an individual who is regarded as dignified, honorable, and worthy of being a role model within their community. *Sahala* is not something that is obtained automatically; rather, it is the result of a long process in a person's life, achieved through faithfulness to the noble values of *habatahon*, tangible contributions to community development, and the ability to uphold the honor of one's family, clan (*marga*), and community. A person who possesses *sahala* is respected not merely because of their background or ancestral heritage, but more so because they demonstrate faithfulness to customary law (*uhum*), uphold the principles of *dalihan na tolu*, and live in a manner that values justice, peace, and social harmony. *Sahala* can also be understood as a form of "cultural authority" that enables a person to be recognized as a leader, peacemaker, or decision-maker within the customary order. This authority does not stem solely from formal positions but arises from a reputation built through experience, wisdom, and a willingness to live in service to the common good. In this sense, *sahala* demands consistency between words and actions, and between beliefs and

tangible deeds. Thus, *sahala* within Batak culture should not be narrowly understood merely as a divine or spiritual power but must be seen as an existential quality that is integrated within the dynamics of social, cultural, and moral life. It is a form of life excellence that grows from the roots of Batak culture, yet remains open to transformation and refinement in line with the progression of time.

The Concept of Blessing from a Biblical Perspective

In the Old Testament, the term “blessing” comes from the Hebrew word *berakha*, which refers to a gift in the form of material possessions or objects, and stands in contrast to the term “curse.” Meanwhile, in the New Testament, this term is translated from the Greek word *eulogia*, which carries a broader meaning, referring to spiritual gifts brought by the Gospel, material blessings, and also abundance. The term “blessing” first appears in the Bible in the early chapters of Genesis, specifically on the fifth day of creation. When God created the living creatures in the sea and in the air, He saw that all was good and blessed them. He said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth” (Gen. 1:22). In general, the use of the term “blessing” can be divided into two primary forms. First, as an utterance or pronouncement of blessing, which is an act of expressing good wishes or intentions toward someone, serving as a declaration of blessing for the future. Second, blessing is also used to describe the realization or fulfillment of God’s promises, whether material or non-material in nature. On the fifth day of creation, after God created the sea creatures and the birds, He declared them to be “good.” Beyond that, He also blessed them, granting them the power to fulfill His calling: to multiply and fill their respective habitats. God’s blessing not only declares goodness but also imparts life and tangible abundance. Similarly, on the sixth day, when God created land animals and humans, He declared all of them good. Then God blessed humanity, granting them the divine mandate to grow, multiply, and fill

the earth a blessing that enables them to fulfill their responsibilities as His intended creation.

Blessing centers on the understanding that God longs to bless His people, and such blessings can be received by sincerely and faithfully asking Him. For example, the Prayer of Jabez, which is often recited daily, focuses on four main requests: asking for abundant blessings, the expansion of territory or influence, the accompaniment of God’s hand, and protection from harm. In this context, it is emphasized that God’s blessing is not limited to material wealth or prosperity but also includes life transformation, expanded opportunities to serve God, and a life filled with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. According to Wilkinson, God’s blessings are withheld only if a person is unwilling to ask for them. Anyone who earnestly and faithfully asks for God’s blessings can experience change in their life, for God, as a loving Father, does not withhold blessings from those who genuinely desire them.

Blessing, in the understanding of the Christian faith, is closely related to the redemptive work of Christ, which brings profound transformation in the relationship between God and His people. Blessing without reconciliation with God through the redemption of Christ on the cross would be futile and meaningless. This is the core of blessing within the Christian faith. True salvific blessing can only be realized through the redemption of Christ, which brings tangible impact to life. This redemption ensures the existence of abundant blessings, encompassing salvation and God’s grace. Jesus Christ, as the Mediator, provides unceasing blessings through His work, which flows to humanity as the source of life and salvation. These blessings are not only tied to Christ’s position as the High Priest and King of kings but also encompass the fullness of love and gifts from God that are channeled through Christ to His people. Through this redemption, the blessings received by believers are manifestations of God’s redemptive and blessing work for His people, while also reflecting the truth that Jesus Christ is the primary mediator through whom divine blessings are received.

Blessing can be understood as an act of God's loving sovereignty, manifested through His words and deeds in bringing about abundance, health, prosperity, and peace for His people. Blessing is not merely a gift but a grace that can transform human life beyond simply receiving worldly benefits. In this context, blessing is related to reward, which in Hebrew is translated as *mishapodotē*s, meaning "reward," or the result or recompense for earnest effort. According to Hebrews 11:6, God rewards those who diligently and faithfully seek Him. The blessings received are not without effort, as God grants rewards to those who earnestly seek Him in faith. The faith that pleases God is the faith that relies entirely on Him and does not doubt His ability to bless. These blessings do not come automatically but are influenced by the genuine efforts within a person's life of faith. There are two types of blessings: first, general blessings given to all people, such as air, sunlight, and daily life; and second, special blessings granted to those who earnestly and faithfully seek God. Hebrews emphasizes that God rewards those who diligently seek Him, and this reward is the result of true faith and the effort to please God. The three main types of blessings discussed in this context are:

1. Blessing of Salvation: Salvation is the greatest blessing received by humanity, which can only be obtained through Jesus Christ. It is not the result of human effort but a gift from God to free His people from sin and grant them eternal life.
2. Blessing of Peace: True peace can only be found through Christ. Unlike the temporary peace offered by the world, the peace given by God is eternal and does not depend on worldly circumstances. This is a blessing that comes as the fruit of a life led by the Holy Spirit.
3. Blessing of Wealth: Material wealth or riches are blessings that often become the goal of human life; however, the Bible reminds us that an excessive desire to accumulate wealth can lead to sin. True wealth is not about the abundance of

possessions but about how a person uses these blessings for God's purposes and in service to others.

4. Blessing of Physical Health: Physical health is also regarded as a blessing from God. Health provides individuals with the opportunity to enjoy life, fulfill responsibilities, and gratefully experience all of God's blessings.

Theological Analysis: The Relationship Between Sahala and Biblical Blessing

A theological analysis of the relationship between *sahala* in Batak Toba tradition and blessing in Christianity illustrates a dialogue between local spirituality concepts and the more universal teachings of the Bible. Fundamentally, both focus on a gift or quality that results from a good relationship with the divine; however, there are significant differences concerning the source and orientation of these blessings. In Batak Toba tradition, *sahala* is a manifestation of a harmonious relationship with God, reflected in the development of personal character and the depth of one's spirituality. *Sahala* is related to the quality of life produced by obedience to God's laws and customary laws (*habatahon*), as well as active participation within the community. *Sahala* is not merely personal charisma but rather social recognition of an individual's ability to uphold moral and spiritual values in daily life, as well as their role in maintaining peace and harmony within the community. The Batak Toba people view *sahala* as a spiritual power that influences not only personal life but also the broader social well-being. In this sense, *sahala* serves as an acknowledgment of the divine influence that flows through individuals within their social lives. In Batak Toba tradition, *sahala* is understood as spiritual power, honor, and authority that shape a person's social and spiritual identity within the community. This concept is born out of a profound relationship between humans, their ancestors, and the divine, such that *sahala* is not merely interpreted as an inherited status but also as a quality acquired through faithfulness to customary law and an awareness of one's relationship with the

Divine. In a society with a deeply religious cosmology, values such as sahala serve as a means of building integration between social structure and religious orientation, making spiritual and moral status inseparable from community life.

Blessing in Christianity, on the other hand, focuses on God's broader and more comprehensive gift, encompassing spiritual blessings, salvation, and grace given by God to His people through the redemptive work of Christ. In the Bible, blessing is not merely understood in a material context but rather as a gift that originates from God's love and sovereignty, transforming human life both in this world and in the life to come. This blessing is experienced not as a human achievement or the result of individual effort alone but as a gift from God granted through faith and fellowship with Christ. In this regard, blessing is inseparable from salvation and the restored relationship with God through Christ's work on the cross. When compared to the understanding of blessing in the Bible, it is evident that Scripture views blessing as God's grace, expressing His goodness, providence, and purpose for humanity. In the Old Testament, blessing is often linked to God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3), focusing on covenantal relationship, God's faithfulness, and the calling to be a blessing to the nations. In the New Testament, blessing reaches its fulfillment in the redemptive work of Christ, in which all spiritual blessings are granted to believers through union with Christ (Eph. 1:3), and faith becomes the means by which these blessings are received, not merely the result of human achievement.

The relationship between sahala and blessing in Christianity lies in the understanding that both are rooted in a greater relationship with God. Sahala, although more focused on social and moral character, serves as an external reflection of a person's spiritual qualities, acquired through faithfulness to divine values. In this sense, sahala can be seen as a form of blessing within the Batak cultural context, expressing the result of a life lived in obedience to God and adherence to customary law. Additionally, Dalihan Na Tolu is closely related to the value of

sahala, encompassing the superior qualities and character formed through the relationship between humans and God. Sahala functions as a foundation for assessing leadership and social responsibility. The practice of sahala is carried out through *somba marhulahula* (respecting the *hulahula*), *manat mardongan tubu* (maintaining caution and harmony with clan members), and *elek marboru* (showing kindness to *boru*), which together form the ethical foundation of social life. These values emphasize the importance of politeness, social responsibility, and respect for social structure. *Dalihan Na Tolu* functions not only within the social order but also carries profound religious significance, with the number three symbolizing the cosmic, social, and spiritual balance considered sacred within Batak Toba culture.

However, blessing in Christianity carries a more transformative and eschatological dimension, focusing on the grace of salvation that can only be attained through the redemption of Christ. The blessing referred to in Christianity is not only related to personal qualities but also encompasses salvation and a renewed life, providing the understanding that a blessed life originates from a restored relationship with God through faith in Christ. Theologically, the relationship between sahala and biblical blessing demonstrates that both lead to a deeper understanding of divine work within human life. Sahala emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with God and the social community as evidence of the blessings received, while blessing in Christianity highlights the significance of a personal relationship with Christ as the foundation of all blessings received. In this sense, sahala can be seen as a reflection of a blessed life within the Batak cultural context, while blessing in Christianity focuses more on the grace of salvation granted through Christ, who sanctifies His people, freeing them from sin and further equipping them to live according to God's will.

The fundamental difference between these two concepts lies in the starting point of the relationship with God. Sahala focuses on human efforts to live rightly, both in spiritual and social aspects, while blessing in Christianity holds that true blessing can only be obtained through the redemptive work of Christ. In other words, sahala within Batak tradition places greater emphasis on personal achievements in daily life, whereas blessing in Christianity is the result of fellowship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, which is not attained through human effort or deeds but brings new life and true transformation in the hearts and actions of His people.

A person considered *marshala* in the perspective of the Batak Toba community is believed to receive a place in *banua ginjang* (the upper realm/heaven/paradise). Meanwhile, in the understanding of the Christian faith, full salvation occurs within the process of sanctification, when a person lives in full awareness of their absolute dependence on God and follows the example of Christ, who lived in an unbroken relationship with the Father. Both, although originating from different traditions and contexts, teach that a blessed life is the result of a deep relationship with God. Both affirm that a life blessed socially, morally, and spiritually stems from a right relationship with God. Sahala reflects the quality of life manifested in social and moral actions, depicting moral and spiritual achievements rooted in obedience to God's law and living in good relationships with others, thus demonstrating the social dimension of the blessings received. Meanwhile, Christian blessing affirms that true blessing can only be obtained through a restored relationship with God through faith in Christ, which is not limited to the material world but encompasses a spiritual life filled with love, peace, and hope, led by the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Both *sahala* in Batak Toba tradition and blessing in the Christian faith focus on the relationship between humans and the divine, yet they have significant differences in their orientation and source. Sahala in Batak Toba culture places greater emphasis on individual spiritual and moral achievement through obedience to God's laws and customary traditions, as well as social contributions that build harmony within the community. Sahala is regarded as an expression of a blessed life, reflected in personal character and a respected social role within society. Meanwhile, blessing in Christianity points more toward the grace of salvation given through the redemptive work of Christ. Blessing from a Christian perspective transcends material dimensions and encompasses a spiritual life filled with love, peace, and hope, which can only be attained through faith in Christ. This blessing transforms human life, not only personally but also bringing transformative impact in relationships with God and others. The primary difference between the two lies in the source of the blessing: sahala focuses on personal achievement influenced by human effort to live according to God's teachings and customary laws, whereas Christian blessing is viewed as a gift received through the redemptive work of Christ. Despite these differences, both teach the importance of a deep relationship with God as the foundation for a blessed life, which includes peace, goodness, and harmony both in this world and in the life to come.

REFERENCES

- Adiprasetya, Joas. *Berteologi dalam Iman: Dasar-Dasar Teologi Sistematis-Konstruktif*. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2023.
- Biri, Surya. "Tinjauan Teologis Eksistensi Yesus Sebagai Logos Dalam Injil Yohanes 1:1-18." *REI MAI: Jurnal Ilmu Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 2.1 (2024): 63–74.
- Butar-butar, Grecetinovitria Merliana. "Kehidupan Setelah Kematian Dalam Perjanjian Lama Dan Keyakinan Batak Toba." *Jurnal Teologi Cultivation* 3.1 (2019): 10–18.

- Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 2. ed., [Nachdr.]. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2009.
- Fu, Timotius. "Evaluasi Terhadap Pengajaran Bruce Wilkinson tentang Doa Yabes berdasarkan Eksposisi 1 Tawarikh 4:9-10." *Veritas: Jurnal Teologi dan Pelayanan* 7.1 (2006): 63–81.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Hutasoit, Nortima, and Riris Johanna Siagian. "Integrasi Dalihan Na Tolu ke dalam Pelayanan Gereja: Studi Teologi Kontekstual Budaya Batak." *MARSAHALA: Jurnal Studi Agama dan Budaya* 1.1 (2025): 1–11.
- Nazir, Mohammad. *Metode Penelitian*. 5th ed. Jakarta: Ghalia Indonesia, 2005.
- Rantesalu, Marsi Bombongan. "Berkat dalam Kitab Kejadian." *Tumou Tou: Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Manado* 3.2 (2016): 39–49.
- Rusmanto, Ayub, Kerin Rajagukguk, and Sriwahyuni. "Persepsi Mengucap Syukur Atas Kasih Karunia Allah Berdasarkan Teks 1 Korintus 1:4-9." *Veritas Lux Mea: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 5.1 (2023): 39–51.
- Sari, Putri Amelia, Mhd Syahminan, and Rholand Muary. "Makna Sosiologis Upacara Sipahalima Bagi Penganut Agama Parmalim (Studi kasus di Desa Binjai Kecamatan Medan Denai Kota Medan)." *KHIDMAT: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Ilmu Sosial* 2.1 (2024): 47–57.
- Siagian, Riris Johana. *Teologi Sahala*. Pematangsiantar: L-SAPIKA INDONESIA, 2022.
- Siagian, Riris Johanna. "Teologi Habatahon Tentang Penciptaan Dunia dan Manusia Sebagai Familia Dei." In *Manusia dan Kuasa Roh: Teologi Habatahon tentang Manusia*. Pematangsiantar: L-SAPIKA INDONESIA, 2023.
- Sitanggang, Pintor Marihot. *Sola Gratia: Rekonsiliasi Sang Rekonsiliator*. Bandung: Widina Bhakti Persada, 2021.
- Sukri, Urbanus, and Herles Babawat. "Berkat Tuhan Berdasarkan Ibrani 11:6B Dan Evaluasi Pembelajaran Teologis Terhadap Pandangan John Bevere Ditengah Jemaat Tuhan." *Inculco Journal of Christian Education* 3.2 (2023): 224–242.
- Telaumbanua, Yohanes, Sunarno Sunarno, and Stella Mulalinda. "Konsep keselamatan: Iman dan Perbuatan Dari Perspektif Teologi Injili." *DIDASKO: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 4.2 (2024): 109–121.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *The mission of God's people: a biblical theology of the church's mission*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010.