

The Most Hotly Contested Word in Romans

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But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ^a for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 3:21-26

Many commentators consider this the most pivotal section of Paul's Letter to the Romans. Some have even called it a summary of the entire Gospel. Huge volumes have been written to explain it. In this brief article I won't attempt anything nearly as ambitious. Instead, the discussion will focus on a single word. That word is ἱλαστήριον.

The word (pronounced "ilasterion") occurs in verse 25, and the NRSV translation above renders it "sacrifice of atonement." This is as good an example as any of how every translation of the Bible is actually an interpretation. Here, for example, is the NASB (2020), a translation known to follow the original text very closely (at least in comparison to other translations):

"...whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith" (Romans 3:25).

To explain "propitiation" the NASB includes this footnote: "I.e., a means of reconciliation between God and mankind by paying the penalty for sin."

Thus according to both the NRSV and the NASB, Paul is propounding the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement: that the manner in which Christ died was a way of making payment for our sins, incurring the deserved punishment in our place.

But none of that is in what Paul actually wrote.

The Greek goes like this:

ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἱλαστήριον διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι.

Here is a literal translation of the Greek:

“...whom God set forth as ἱλαστήριον through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:25).

I will come soon to the translation of ἱλαστήριον. For the moment, let’s just note that in comparison to a literal rendering, the versions even in the two very reputable translations just cited seem like paraphrases. It is exceedingly difficult to read the New Testament apart from the influence of centuries of church theology that we tend to take for granted. According to the traditional interpretation, Paul is stating that Christ served as a sacrifice to atone for our sins, and by that action we who have faith in Christ are “justified” (i.e., considered as not having sinned), so that we may escape the judgment and punishment that was due to us.

To arrive at this interpretation, one must read many assumptions into the text. There is also a tendency to add extra words: for example, “effective” (NRSV) and “publicly” (NASB) do not occur in the Greek, and as we shall see, neither do “sacrifice,” “atonement,” nor “propitiation.” Other translations are even freer. Translators must constantly make decisions, many of them difficult, with the inevitable result that often they end up guiding the reader toward their understanding of what the text means. That is hard if not impossible to avoid. A translator must first determine what the text means in order to choose the right words in the target language, and so, right or wrong, the translator’s take on the text is what the reader is left with.

I have no more access to the mind of Paul than do any of these translators, and their expertise in Greek, far greater than mine, is not in question. I am only suggesting that in understanding this passage we try as much as possible not to go beyond its actual words.

So to understand ἱλαστήριον let's see how it is used elsewhere in the Bible. The word itself occurs in only one other place in the New Testament, Hebrews 9:5:

In [the Holy of Holies] stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot speak now in detail. (Hebrews 9:4-5)

The word translated "mercy seat" is ἱλαστήριον. And while the word is rare in the New Testament, it occurs several times in the LXX, mostly in Exodus and Leviticus. In all those instances it translates the Hebrew word כַּפֹּתֶיךָ, which means "cover" and refers to the golden cover of the Ark of the Covenant as it lay in the Holy of Holies. Ever since Tyndale, Christian Bibles have translated this Hebrew word "mercy seat." This is the same meaning the word has in Hebrews: the golden cover on top of the ark.

There are just a few places in the LXX where ἱλαστήριον translates a different Hebrew word, all in Ezekiel, verses 43:14,17,20. Here the Hebrew word is עֲזָרָה, which refers to a ledge around the altar of the new Temple. In no case in the Bible is ἱλαστήριον used to actually mean "sacrifice," and much less "sacrifice of atonement."

So how did we come to "sacrifice of atonement" (NRSV) or "propitiation" (NASB)? "Propitiation" (as opposed to "expiation," which simply means the erasure of sin) means placating God or gods so as to turn away the divine anger. Words related to ἱλαστήριον may have had this kind of meaning in some forms of ancient literature. But commenting on the use of ἱλαστήριον in Romans 3:25, the United Bible Society's Translator's Handbook says:

Although this noun (and its related forms) is sometimes used by pagan writers in the sense of propitiation (that is, an act to appease or placate a god), it is never used this way in the Old Testament. There God never appears as the object of this noun (that is, the one who is placated), though God does appear as the subject with sin as the object, in which case the meaning is “God expiates (that is, forgives) sins.” For this reason, the meaning of expiation (equivalent to TEV the means by which [people]’s sins are forgiven) is a much more accurate translation than propitiation (see Moffatt and Phillips “the means of propitiation”).

So ἰλαστήριον is not a sacrifice, and it is not a propitiation. Yes, the sacrificed animal’s blood was sprinkled on the ark cover or “mercy seat” on the Day of Atonement. But the mercy seat itself was not the sacrifice. It was the place through which God’s grace became manifest. The word in fact is related to a word meaning to be gracious or merciful (cf. Luke 18:13).

So how might one translate this phrase? Here is what I would suggest: “whom God set forth as the place of God’s mercy.” This is both more accurate, and avoids reading into the text a doctrine that came later. It also suggests an image of Christ as a place where God’s love can actually be felt. That too may be a bit of commentary, but it is less a departure from the text than is the tendency to read into the passage the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.

But might not Jesus’s death be considered a sacrifice? Yes, certainly – in the sense that he gave his life to demonstrate to all of us that God remains with us even through the worst we may be called upon to suffer. Looking at it this way avoids the notion that the shedding of blood and a brutal death are necessary to deflect the wrath of a punishing God.

Death cannot be the agent of the forgiveness of sins. For then one might ask, what about all those many thousand crucified innocents who suffered much more than Jesus? For Jesus died the night he was crucified, while most others lay hanging from the cross for days, their bodies attacked by birds of prey from above and by dogs and wild beasts from below. How could the death of Jesus achieve atonement, while the suffering of those others counted for nothing? If we are careful with our translations, we need not fall into such theological conundrums.

The greatest difficulty in reading the New Testament is separating the text from the complex web of interpretations imposed upon it by centuries of theology, including the tendency of Gentile interpreters to take literally what

the Jewish authors intended midrashically. My personal conviction is that these texts have profound truths to reveal, if we can somehow bracket all we have “learned” about them since the time they were written. This may be an impossible task, not completely achievable, but it is nevertheless a process through which we may find ourselves surprised, and perhaps even transformed.

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