

A Word Study of the Greek Terms Hilasterion and Hilasmos
Expiation versus Propitiation
A Series on What is Atonement: Part 3

The terms “propitiation” and “expiation” are essential components to the concept of atonement. Yet these two different terms are used to translate the Greek nouns “hilasterion” and “hilasmos”. Why?

Some examples of this can be seen between various Bible translations:

Romans 3:25

“whom God put forward as an **expiation** by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” (RSV)

“whom God displayed publicly as a **propitiation** of His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed. (NASB)

1 John 2:2

“and his is the **expiation** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” (RSV)

“And He Himself is the **propitiation** for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.” (NASB)

What does “expiation” and “propitiation” mean?

Expiation means “to make amends” or “to atone for”, and it implies the removal or cleansing of sin. It can also be seen as “the removal of the reasons for punishment”.

If Christ’s atonement was *only* an expiation of sin, then it meant that God acted as the subject that covered the sins of human beings so that God forgave it.

Too much emphasis on expiation risks making God as only concerned with the legal aspects of sin; Jesus merely covered sin.

Propitiation means “to make favorable”, and it refers to averting God’s wrath against sinners. It is the act that appeased the total and full wrath of God’s judgment for the sins of human beings. Because of the appeasement’s completeness, propitiation is also understood as “satisfaction.”

If Christ’s atonement was *only* a propitiation, then it meant that God was the object receiving the sin offering satisfying God’s holy anger towards sin so that forgiven human beings could come into the presence of God.

Too much emphasis on propitiation risks making God as tyrannical and only concerned with appeasement, which is contrary to His character of righteousness and justice; Jesus merely satisfied God’ holy anger.

Let’s define these terms in another way by means of an illustration:

You just stole a piece of candy and you’ve been caught by the furious store owner.

a) Jesus intercedes and offers to pay / go to jail for the candy and justice prevails. This is expiation.

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b) Jesus intercedes and pays the full price for your crime to the satisfaction of an offended store owner and his wrath is averted. This is propitiation.

The background to the Greek nouns “hilasterion” and “hilasmos” provide a better to understanding to the terms “expiation” and “propitiation”. They are terms found in both Old and New Testaments, but they are based on the Old Testament sacrificial system.

The Septuagint (LLX) usage of “hilasterion” and “hilasmos”

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX), the Greek term “hilasterion” was used several times to translate the Hebrew term “kapporet,” which specified the lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

You shall make a mercy seat (**hilastērion**) of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits wide. You shall make two cherubim of gold, make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat (**hilastērion**). Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim of one piece with the mercy seat (**hilastērion**) at its two ends. The cherubim shall have their wings spread upward, covering the mercy seat (**hilastērion**) with their wings and facing one another; the faces of the cherubim are to be turned toward the mercy seat (**hilastērion**). You shall put the mercy seat (**hilastērion**) on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony which I will give to you. There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat (**hilastērion**), from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel. (Ex 25:17-22)

“Kapporet” has been translated as “mercy seat” or “covering”. However, this is not a correct translation.

In 1523, when Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, the Hebrew term “kapporet” was translated into “gnadenstuhl” which means “seat of grace”. William Tyndale, in his translation of the Bible, translated Luther’s “gnadenstuhl” as “mercy seat”.

Because the noun “kapporet” was probably formed from the Hebrew verb “kaphar”, which meant “to cover / purge, to propitiate”, a more accurate translation would be “thing for propitiation”, “means of propitiation” or “place of propitiation”.

The “place of propitiation” was a slab of pure gold (approximately 27 inches wide x 45 inches long). On opposite ends of the lid were two gold cherubim facing each other and bowing toward the seat. Their angelic wings stretched out towards each other constituted the throne of God. This indicated the place where God sat when He communicated with Moses.

On the Day of Atonement, the Holy of Holies, which housed the Ark of the Covenant would have specially prepared incense burning so that a cloud would cover the place of propitiation and provide a smoke screen so that the high priest cannot see the face of God.

The sin offering was the sacrificial ritual by which Hebrews offered the blood or flesh of an animal to God for a substitute payment for their sin (intentional or unintentional). The sacrificed animal had to be physically perfect in age and condition. Perfection was thus presented to God, and it symbolized the requirement that human beings present themselves perfect before holy God.

By God’s judicial standard, death is the penalty for sin.

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Blood is of particular significance to God. In Exodus 12, God instructed the Hebrews to sacrifice an unblemished male lamb and apply its blood to the sides and tops of the door frame of their homes (Ex 12:1-12). When God saw the blood, He passed over the homes of the Hebrews while striking down the first born throughout the land of Egypt. In another instance, God reveals that the life of an animal is in its blood and that He provided animals so that the Hebrews could make atonement for their souls; it is the blood, representing a life, that makes atonement (Lev 17:11).

Blood of an unblemished animal is necessary and sufficient for the atonement of sin.

A person making the offering, selects and presents the animal to the altar. The person lays his hands on the animal and symbolically transfers the sin and guilt of the party on to the animal, which is then sacrificed. God's judicial requirement allowed human beings to present sin offerings where the life of a bull or sheep could be given in place of their own. This substitution covered the sins of people, made restitution and restored their relationship with God.

The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) is the only day that the high priest can enter the Holy of Holies and is the only day that the nation of Israel can make atonement for all their sin of the year (Lev 16:1-34). On this day the high priest sacrificed a young bull to atone for himself and his family. For the nation of Israel, two male goats were used. One was sacrificed and the other was the scapegoat. The scapegoat received the sins of the nation, which was released to the wilderness to perish and symbolized the total removal of sin.

On the Day of Atonement, the blood of the sacrificed bull and goat, represented the covering of sin (expiation), which sprinkled on the place of propitiation signified the mercy of God to forgive sin; this may have been why the translation for "kapporet" ultimately became "mercy seat".

The use of the Greek nouns "hilasterion" and "hilasmos" in the LXX appear to have "expiation" in view.

Extrabiblical Usage of "hilasterion" and "hilasmos"

The noun "hilasterion" is relatively rare in classical Greek and appears largely in late writings associated with pagan worship. The Greeks used the term when referring to a sacrifice that one brought to appease the anger of their pagan gods.

The Greek sacrificial rite sought to either win the favor or avert the anger of the gods.

There are distinct differences in the pagan Greek rites compared to the Old Testament sacrificial system.

Greek acts of propitiation included forms of worship other than sacrifice. They included prayer, purification rites and dances. Pagan sacrifices also included the sacrifices of human beings.

Greek rites not only appeased the gods, but they also expiated the guilt of human beings in the process of reconciliation with the respective god(s).

However, it should be noted that the Greek system was essentially a method to purchase the favor of their capricious gods.

In extrabiblical Greek writings, the nouns "hilasterion" and "hilasmos" were intended to mean "propitiation".

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The New Testament usage of “hilasterion” and “hilasmos”

The Greek nouns “hilasterion” and “hilasmos” are used in four instances of the New Testament:

“whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation (hilasterion) in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;” (Rom 3:25)

“and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat (hilasterion); but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.” (Heb 9:5)

“and He Himself is the propitiation (hilasmos) for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2)

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation (hilasmos) for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

Romans 3:25 and Hebrews 9:5 draw parallels of Jesus Christ with the Old Testament sacrificial system and specifically to the process of the forgiveness of sin. Romans 3:25 refers to the “forbearance of God” in passing over sins just as the Old Testament sacrificial system of sprinkling sacrificed blood on the place of propitiation. Hebrews 9:5 reviews the Old Testament sacrificial system to the New Testament audience and associates the blood of Jesus with the blood of the sacrificed unblemished male lamb that was sprinkled on the place of propitiation.

Romans 3:25 and Hebrews 9:5 symbolically identify Jesus Christ as the place of propitiation.

For the Jewish audience, the sacrificial system reminded them of the ritual requirements for the expiation of sin.

For the Greek audience, the ritual reminded them of the process of appeasing a wrathful god.

And yet Paul’s God (Rom 3:25) is like no other, because He provides the propitiation “in His blood”; unlike Greek gods, no man could bribe or appease the righteous judgment of God.

While the blood of Jesus Christ expiates (covers) the sins of human beings, Jesus Christ Himself is the place where propitiation takes place. Only through faith in Jesus Christ is man forgiven.

“Hilasmos” in 1 John 2:2 and 1 John 4:10, refers to the death of Jesus with a nuance of meaning similar to the extrabiblical Greek usage: a sacrifice that appeases the wrath of God and makes God propitious (favorable) towards human beings.

In this New Testament usage, Jesus Christ is called the “propitiation of our sins”, because He substitutes Himself in our place and assumes the penalty of our sins.

The context of 1 John 2 casts Jesus as our Advocate who defends us against God’s anger.

The context of 1 John 4 portrays God as a God of love, who sent His only Son to atone for our sins so that we may not receive His wrath. God’s grace should motivate our love for others.

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Conclusion

The New Testament use of the Greek nouns "hilasterion" and "hilasmos" bring to light a clearer picture of the work of Jesus Christ. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ was more than simply an "expiation", and it was more than simply a "propitiation". It was an act that accomplished both functions and emphasized the unique character of Jesus and provided the logical basis of salvation: belief in His atonement for your sins.

Because both expiation and propitiation are directed towards God, these acts are viewed as illustrating the *objective* aspects of atonement. Yet by themselves, they do not portray a complete picture of Christ's work of atonement. Just as important as it is to understand God's legal and judicial viewpoint, we must understand that God's intent of atonement was directed towards human beings as well.

The atonement of Jesus Christ is both an expiation and a propitiation. When Jesus speaks of fulfilling the Law in Matthew 5:17, He meant it in a literal sense.

Just as the Old Testament High Priest applied the blood of the sacrificed lamb on the mercy seat to expiate the sins of Israel, Jesus Christ, the High Priest Himself, provided the blood for the expiation of sins of human beings.

Just as the kapporet was the "place of propitiation", Jesus became the "mercy seat", the place of propitiation for human beings, and satisfied the judgment of God.

The Mosaic legislation clearly was concerned about both sin and justice and in Jesus the Mosaic Law was truly fulfilled. God initiates the process, He provides Himself as the only acceptable sacrifice, He administers the penalty against sin, He experiences His own wrath of judicial judgment and He receives His own sacrifice and justice. And it is only through a belief that Jesus Christ did indeed die and atoned for the sins of human beings that one may be forgiven and restore their relationship with God.