

JESUS AS THE MERCY SEAT:  
THE SEMANTICS AND THEOLOGY OF PAUL'S USE OF  
*HILASTERION* IN ROMANS 3:25<sup>1</sup>

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Interpreters of Romans 3:25 and 4 Maccabees 17:22 (codex S) commonly base their conclusions about ἱλαστήριον upon the immediate literary context coupled with vague notions of Jewish sacrifice and of the verbs ἰλάσκεσθαι and ἐξιλάσκεσθαι. Instead, scholars should consider the more important linguistic evidence, namely, the concrete, non-metaphorical uses of the substantive ἱλαστήριον in other ancient sources. They should be wary of investing ἱλαστήριον with meanings that are otherwise unattested (even though they may make sense in Romans or 4 Maccabees) and of paralleling Romans and 4 Maccabees prematurely. Only concrete, inanimate referents of this term are actually found in the other ancient sources; a ἱλαστήριον is always a thing—never an idea or an action or an animal. This suggests that the uses of ἱλαστήριον in Romans 3:25 and 4 Maccabees 17:22 are metaphorical, while further exegesis shows that the two metaphors must be distinct, reflecting two different concrete uses of the term.

Unfortunately, past studies of ἱλαστήριον have often allowed theological considerations to overshadow lexicography. Hence it was the *doctrine* of propitiation rather than the actual occurrences of the term ἱλαστήριον in ancient sources that dominated the English-language discussion of Romans 3:25 in the twentieth century. C.H. Dodd reacted against this doctrine and argued that the root idea behind Paul's use of ἱλαστήριον was one of *expiation* (of sin) rather than *propitiation* (of God). But Dodd based his study not on ἱλαστήριον itself but on the use of the verb ἰλάσκεσθαι and its cognates in the Septuagint. The result was an over-emphasis on verb-based notions of a theological function, whether the propitiating of God or the expiating of sin, with too little attention to the concrete

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel P. Bailey, *Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul's Use of Hilasterion in Romans 3:25* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1999); supervisor: Professor Morna D. Hooker.

referents of the term ἱλαστήριον, such as the Old Testament mercy seat and Greek votive offerings.

Admittedly, abstract notions of propitiation or expiation *can* be fitted into the context of Romans 3:21-26. The problem from a lexicographical standpoint is that words ending in -τήριον seldom denote abstract verbal ideas, while ἱλαστήριον never does; the suffix -τήριον is very concrete.

Additional mistakes can be made by ignoring the available linguistic evidence. Since Paul elsewhere compares Jesus to an animal victim, as for example in Romans 8:3, where the phrase περὶ ἁμαρτίας is standard Septuagintal language for the Levitical ‘sin offering’ or **חַטָּאת** (cf. NRSV mg.), many have mistakenly concluded that similar victim language must be present in Romans 3:25. Jesus is said to be a ἱλαστήριον; he is also said to have shed his *blood*. Therefore, it is commonly assumed that a ἱλαστήριον in the ancient world must have been something that could shed its blood, i.e. a sacrificial *victim* (‘sacrifice of atonement’, NIV; NRSV). This, too, fits the immediate context. But it is a false syllogism, since it assumes that the meaning of ἱλαστήριον can be determined by the meaning of ‘blood’, and is moreover supported by no external evidence: ἱλαστήριον never denotes an animal victim in any known source.

In fact, there are only two main applications of the term ἱλαστήριον up through the middle of the second century AD. It can designate (1) the golden ‘mercy seat’ or **כִּסֵּא הַרַחֲמִים** on top of Israel’s ark of the covenant (LXX Pentateuch; Heb. 9:5; six times in Philo); or (2) durable votive offerings to the pagan deities, generally ἀναθήματα (cf. LSJ s.v. ἱλαστήριος II.2). (There are also minor extensions of the Pentateuchal use in the prophets: cf. Ezk. 43:14, 17, 20; Am. 9:1.)

The application of ἱλαστήριον to Greek votive offerings was the normal or mainstream use in the first century AD. While generally pagan, it is also reflected in Jewish sources such as Josephus *Ant.* 16.182 and 4 Maccabees 17:22 (see below). The ἱλαστήριον in Josephus is a marble monument. But the most famous ἱλαστήριον in the ancient world was the Trojan Horse. This was called a θελκτήριον or ‘charm’ by Homer (*Od.* 8.509) but a ἱλαστήριον or ‘propitiatory gift’ by Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 11.121) and by two later commentators on Homer (anonymous scholia, ed. Dindorf [1855]; comm. by Eustathius of Thessalonica, ed. Stallbaum [1825]). The term ἱλαστήριον or its Rhodian variant ἱλατήριον was customarily inscribed on other gifts dedicated to the gods. These include statues, monuments, or stelae (*Inscr. Cos* 81 and 347, ed. Paton and Hicks

[1891]; *Bullettino del Museo dell'Impero Romano* 3 [1932], p. 14, no. 11, ed. Patriarca, printed as appendix to *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 60 [1932]; variant ἱλατήριον, *Lindos II*, no. 425, ed. Blinkenberg [1941]), drinking bowls (e.g. a φιάλη as a ἱλατήριον, *Die Lindische Tempelchronik*, B49, ed. Blinkenberg [1915]), and tripods (e.g. a τρίπους as a ἱλαστήριον, scholion on Apollonius of Rhodes 4.1549, ed. Wendel [1935]).

Ἰλαστήριον (ἱλαστήριον) in all these extra-biblical occurrences can be glossed by '(sc. ἀνάθημα) *propitiatory gift or offering*' (LSJ). Or, to adopt an ancient definition, pagan ἱλαστήρια are generally τὰ ἐκμειλίξασθαι δυνάμενα δῶρα, 'gifts capable of appeasing' (sc. the gods) (scholion on Apollonius).

Since this application to votive offerings was typical, it is a possible background to Romans 3:25. Yet no one has ever succeeded in showing how God is supposed to have presented humanity (or himself?) with a gift that people normally presented to the gods. Moreover, the mainstream use of ἱλαστήριον finds no parallel in 'the law and the prophets' to which Paul appeals (Rom. 3:21). The general meaning 'propitiatory gift' therefore fails to fit the context of Romans 3:25.

By contrast, a more specialised allusion to the biblical 'mercy seat' (which is not a gift to the gods) does fit Paul's context, with plenty of support from lexicography (cf. LXX Pentateuch). Paul focuses on 'the law and the prophets' and then more particularly on the Song of Moses in Exodus 15. The combination of God's righteousness and redemption in Exodus 15:13 (ὠδήγησας τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ σου τὸν λαόν σου τοῦτον, ὃν ἐλυτρώσω) closely parallels Romans 3:24 (δικαιόω and ἀπολύτρωσις). Furthermore, Exodus 15:17 promises that the exodus would lead to a new, ideal sanctuary established by God himself. God's open setting out of Jesus as the new ἱλαστήριον—the centre of the sanctuary and focus of both the revelation of God (Ex. 25:22; Lv. 16:2; Nu. 7:89) and atonement for sin (Leviticus 16)—fulfils this tradition.

Applying the biblical sense of ἱλαστήριον to Jesus in this theologically pregnant way would not have been entirely unprecedented for Paul, since Philo thought of the mercy seat as σύμβολον τῆς ἰλεω τοῦ θεοῦ δυνάμεως, 'a symbol of the gracious power of God' (*Mos.* 2.96; cf. *Fug.* 100). Perhaps this shows that Philo traced the term ἱλαστήριον etymologically not to ἱλάσκεσθαι ('to propitiate *or* expiate') but to ἴλεως, 'gracious' or 'merciful'. This would then support the translation by 'mercy seat', though the vaguer

expression ‘place of atonement’ is also in common use (NRSV mg. at Rom. 3:25 and Heb. 9:5). The old objection that Paul cannot have alluded to ‘the’ well-known ἱλαστήριον of the Pentateuch without using the Greek definite article is baseless, since Philo clearly uses anarthrous ἱλαστήριον to refer to the mercy seat (*Mos.* 2.95, 97; *Fug.* 100).

Finally, in 4 Maccabees 17:22 codex S (codex A is secondary), the controversial expression το; ἱλαστήριον τοῦ θανάτου αὐτῶν, ‘the ἱλαστήριον of their death’ (referring to the martyrs) can be interpreted by the same kind of appeal to established usage. Only the results are different from those seen in Romans 3:25. It makes no sense to speak of ‘the mercy seat of their death’ in 4 Maccabees; this imagery works only in Romans. However, the mainstream Greek metaphor ‘the propitiatory offering of their death’ or ‘their death as a propitiatory votive offering’ is completely in keeping with the use of Greek heroic and athletic imagery elsewhere in 4 Maccabees 17:8-24. While Romans 3:25 cannot be understood apart from a knowledge of the Septuagint, no such knowledge is necessary to understand 4 Maccabees 17:22. The language and imagery are essentially Greek, and the more Jewish or biblical-sounding translation ‘their death as an [act of] atoning sacrifice’ (NRSV) is misleading, since ἱλαστήριον does not denote the *act* of sacrifice, nor are the martyrs compared with *victims* of sacrifice (such as those on the Day of Atonement).

In sum, considerations of both lexicography and context combine to discourage the common practice of paralleling Romans 3:25 and 4 Maccabees 17:22. Different metaphors—one biblical, the other mainstream Greek—explain each passage.