'Hilaskesthai' and Related Words
in the New Testament
by Norman H. Young

Dr. Young was a student in Manchester of the former editor of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY and has written this essay on a subject of continuing interest 'in appreciation of my former teacher, F. F. Bruce'. He is a lecturer in the Department of Theology at Avondale College, Cooranbong, Australia.

It has become standard practice since the publication of C. H. Dodd's[1] magisterial study on (ἐξ) ἰλάσκεσθαι and cognates in the Greek Bible to translate the New Testament occurrences of this word by 'expiation' or some equivalent term or paraphrase.[2] Although the method that Dodd employed in his analysis of the Septuagint's usage of ἐξιλάσκεσθαι has been challenged,[3] his conclusion that 'expiation' and not 'propitiation' is the more accurate translation in the NT for the ἰλάσκεσθαι word group has been (and remains) widely accepted.

A major complaint against Dodd's study of ἰλάσκεσθαι and cognates in the NT has been that he underrates the concept of wrath, which, L. L. Morris[4] contends, 'seems to represent a stubborn substratum of meaning from which all the usages can be naturally explained.' It is the contention of this paper that this complaint has itself ignored the support that the immediate context gives to Dodd's thesis in each of the NT examples of this word group.

The texts that we will examine are Luke 18:13; Rom. 3:25 (Heb. 9:5); Heb. 2:17, 8:12; 1 John 2:2, 4:10 which constitute the total occurrences of the ἰλασκ. word group in the NT.[5] The words of Luke 18:13 Ὁ θεός ἰλάσθητί μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ form the content of the tax collector's prayer and appear to be drawn from the penitential opening address of Ps. 51:1. The LXX rendering of this passage differs from Luke and reads ἐλέησόν (Heb. = *hanan*) με, ὁ θεός, but this may well be the same idea that ἰλάσθητι conveys.[6] D. Hill[7] suggests that ideas of propitiation are in the background. This is the most that can be said — possibly more than can be said.

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1 C. H. Dodd, 'ΙΛΑΣΚΕΣΘΑΙ, Its Cognates, Derivatives, and Synonyms, in the Septuagint,' *JTS* 32 (1931), 352-60. Reprinted in *The Bible and the Greeks* (London, 1935), 82-95.

2 This is true for both translators and commentators. Among translations one may give the following as examples: RSV, NEB, Jerusalem Bible, TEV, NIV (text). Prior to 1931 'propitiation' was the usual translation ἰλάσκεσθαι and related words in the NT.

3 See my article, 'C. H. Dodd, "Hilaskesthai" and His Critics', *EQ* 48 (1976), 67-78.

4 L. L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (3rd. ed., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1965), 173.

5 The occurrence in Matt. 16:22 is idiomatic.

6 Ps. 78(79):9 (LXX) has ἰλάσθητι ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ἡμῶν ἕνεκα τοῦ ὀνόματός σου.

7 D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings* (Cambridge, 1967), 36.

The direct concern of the petition is that God from his grace will be merciful towards the suppliant. The tax collector has no illusions about his need of divine forgiveness nor the absence of any personal merits that he might plead as grounds for divine favour. The physical posture and position he assumes clearly indicate his total reliance on the divine mercy. The appositional self-description — μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ[4] — clearly indicates the specific area of his concern: he desires God to forgive him his sin and accept him into his presence. Jesus' concluding declaration κατέβη οὗτος δεδικαιωμένος εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ παρ' ἐκεῖνον assures his hearers (those who trusted themselves because they were righteous, *v.* 9) that just such a petitioner is cleared with God. There is no hint of the prayer propitiating God, or God propitiating himself, it is solely a matter of divine forgiveness and acquittal for mercy's sake.

Every word in Rom. 3:25 is a matter of debate. There is even a widely held belief that the term ἱλαστήριον does not derive from Paul himself but is part of a Jewish Christian fragment which Paul quotes and corrects. I have elsewhere[9] argued for the Pauline authorship of Rom. 3:24-25 and more recent studies[10] have not caused me to change my mind. Our concern, then, is to establish the meaning Paul had in mind when he used the term ἱλαστήριον.

Of the twenty-seven occurrences of the word in the LXX twenty of them translate *kapporeth* and this provides *prima facie* the most likely background for Paul's usage in Rom. 3:25. This, however, has been widely and fiercely contested.[11] The lack of the article[12] certainly indicates that Paul did not intend to identify Jesus with a long lost cult object, but that does not mean that ἱλαστήριον, especially when joined with ἐν τῷ αἵματι, would not be associated with the Day of Atonement expiation of Israel's sin by any first century Jew, or indeed any Gentile, who was at all familiar with the LXX (as Paul was).[13]

The form of ἱλαστήριον is almost certainly an accusative neuter

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[8] Literally, 'to me the sinful one'.

[9] N. H. Young, 'Did St. Paul Compose Romans iii:24f.?' *ABR* 22 (1974), 23-32.

[10] Two writers who reject the pre-Pauline fragment hypothesis are W. A. Maier, 'Paul's Concept of Justification, and Some Recent Interpretations of Romans 3:21-31', *The Springfielder* 37 (1974), 248-64; J. Piper, 'The Demonstration of the Righteousness of God in Romans 3:25, 26', *JSNT* 7 (1980), 2-32. A recent defence of the thesis that Paul is using traditional material in Rom. 3:25f. is Peter Stuhlmacher, 'Zur neueren Exegese von Röm 3, 24-26', in E. E. Ellis and Erich Grässer (ed.), *Jesus und Paulus* (Göttingen, 1975), 315-33.

[11] Morris, *op. cit.*, 193-98.

[12] *Cf.* Morris, *op. cit.*, 194. The LXX usually has the article as does Heb. 9:5 when the reference is to the golden lid of the ark.

[13] Stuhlmacher, *op. cit.*, 328ff.; M. Hengel, 'The Expiatory Sacrifice of Christ', *BJRL* 62 (1980), 463ff.

(rather than masculine) noun (rather than an adjective) used predicatively[14] with ὅν, and thus Paul is asserting that God presented (or perhaps 'purposed' = προέθετο) Christ[15] as an expiation by his sacrificial death. Universal human sin in the immediate context is the matter towards which the divine activity is directed, whether it be the sin of Jew and Gentile (*v.* 23) or past (τὰ προγεγονότα ἁμαρτήματα, *v.* 25c) and present sins (ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ , *v.* 26b). God's initiative in this act of expiation in Christ's blood is stressed (προέθετο ὁ θεός, *v.* 25) and the primary object of this activity is not God himself, but human sin. The acquittal of believers is again (*cf.* Lk. 18:14) involved in the divine activity of expiation in Christ's sacrificial death and confirms that the pattern is one of grace, mercy (δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριρι, *v.* 24), expiation of sin and acquittal.

All men are now presented with the alternative of God's judgment on their sin or God's expiation of their sin in the death of Christ, but this is not because wrath is appeased or satisfied but because atonement has been divinely established. It is indeed a new universal act of atonement for both Jew and Gentile and it has brought about an entirely new situation.[16]

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To say that Christ as our high priest became in every way like us εἰς τὸ ἱλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ (Heb. 2:17) is a strange Greek construction; and if we understand the clause literally as 'in order to appease the sins of the people', then neither the Greek nor the English make sense without modifying the meaning of the verb. Morris' attempt[17] to make it an accusative of respect by appealing to the minor reading of ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις is unconvincing.[18] The dative is more likely to have arisen not because some scribe wrote this case as an alternative for an accusative of respect, but because the copyist found the construction of a direct accusative[19] (τὰς ἁμαρτίας) after ἱλάσκεσθαι impossible,[20] which indicates that Heb. 2:17 is not following profane idiom.

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14 C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge 1959), 35.

15 The argument that the allusion to the so-called mercy-seat makes impossibly harsh typology because the cross not Christ was the place of expiation is an objection of modern logic and not one likely to be raised by the early church's typology. See U. Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer,* Band I (Zurich, 1978), 191f.

16 G. Howard, 'Romans 3:21-31 and the Inclusion of the Gentiles', *HTR* 63 (1970), 223-33.

17 Morris, *op. cit.,* 204f.

18 Hill, *op. cit.,* 38, suggests that Morris is making a virtue out of necessity.

19 There is one example of τὰς ἁμαρτίας after ἱλάσκεσθαι in the LXX, namely, Ps. 64 (65):4 and again some manuscripts have the dative. There are also similar constructions in Sirach: Sir 3:3, 30; 5:6; 20:28; 28:15; 34:19.

20 As Morris himself grants, *op. cit.,* 205.

Hebrews 2:17 uses two final clauses to give the reasons for Christ's becoming in all things like his brethren:

ἵνα ἐλεήμων γένηται καὶ πιστὸς ἀρχιερεύς ...

εἰς τὸ ἱλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ.

Christ's humanity not only related him sympathetically to his brethren in the flesh but also was the means of expiating their sins (Heb. 10:5-14). Hebrews uses a series of purpose clauses to state why Jesus shared in blood and flesh like his kin: ἵνα διὰ τοῦ θανάτου καταργήσῃ τὸν τὸ κράτος ἔχοντα τοῦ θανάτου 2:14); ἵνα προσφέρῃ δῶρά τε καὶ θυσίας ὑπὲρ ἁμαρτιῶν (5:1);[21] εἰς τὸ πολλῶν ἀνενεγκεῖν ἁμαρτίας (9:28); ἵνα ἁγιάσῃ διὰ τοῦ ἰδίου αἵματος τὸν λαόν (13:12), and we may add as belonging to the same thought-sphere (*i.e.*, sacrificial forgiveness of sin) εἰς τὸ ἱλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ (2:17).

The language of Heb. 2:17 is again drawn from the Day of Atonement expiatory ritual. The reference to an high priest, sins of the people and expiation make that clear; the LXX rendering of Lev. 16:24, 34 gives a close parallel: ἐξιλάσεται ... περὶ τοῦ λαοῦ; ἐξιλάσκεσθαι περὶ τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ ἀπὸ πασῶν τῶν ἁμαρτίων αὐτῶν.[22] Sin removal, expiation, is the background that the purpose clause in Heb. 2:17c is drawing upon and the verse retains that perspective.

Again we should observe that the initiative is Christ's (or God's); that the purpose is to deliver (ἀπαλλάσσειν *v.* 15), to help (ἐπιλαμβάνεσθαι, *v.* 16), to destroy the enemy (καταργεῖν, *v.* 14); and that the ground is his mercy (ἐλεήμων, *v.* 17) and faithfulness (πιστός, *v.* 17). The immediate context says nothing of wrath.[23]

In Heb. 8:8-12 the new covenant promise of Jer. 31:31-34 is quoted *in extenso*. The element that particularly seems to be his concern is the divine promise

ὅτι ἵλεως ἔσομαι ταῖς ἀδικίαις αὐτῶν

καὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν οὐ μὴ μνησθῶ ἔτι (Heb. 8:12).

It is this aspect which is picked up again in 10:17 (καὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν καὶ τῶν ἀνομιῶν αὐτῶν οὐ μὴ μνησθήσομαι ἔτι) and draws the comment ὅπου δὲ ἄφεσις τούτων, οὐκέτι προσφορὰ περὶ ἁμαρτίας (*v.* 18). The language in the immediate context is once again directly related to sin and the forgiveness of sin through the divine initiative (ἔσομαι, οὐ μὴ μνησθῶ) and mercy in the death of Christ (προσφορά). What is becoming a pattern is also followed in 1 John, for Christ is

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[21] A general statement which, nevertheless, includes the high priestly activity of Jesus.

[22] Speaking of Aaron, Sir. 45:16 says ἐξιλάσκεσθαι περὶ τοῦ λαοῦ σου.

[23] This is granted by Morris (*op. cit.*, 202), but R. R. Nicole ('C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation', *WTJ* 17 (1955), 141), wanders as far away from Heb. 2:17 as 12:29 to demonstrate the general context. His nearest references are 2:3 and 3:10.

ἱλασμός specifically περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν (1 Jn. 2:2; 4:10). Christ likewise as παράκλητος[24] is the unchallengeable defence for his people against the satanic[25] charges of sin.[26] The phrase πρὸς τὸν πατέρα means somewhat as in John 1:1-2, 'in the presence of' or 'in relationship with' (*cf.* 1 Jn. 1:2); it does not in any way whatsoever mean that the Advocate's task is towards the Father's wrath.[27] The parallel structure of 1 Jn. 1:6-2:1f. as outlined by Lyonet[28] gives an illuminating insight into the meaning of ἱλασμός in this context.

I	II
1:6 ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ σκότει περιπατῶμεν * ψευδόμεθα * οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν	1:7 ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ φωτὶ περι-πατῶμεν * κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' ἀλλήλων * τὸ αἷμα 'Ιησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας
1:8 ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν * ἑαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν * ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν	1:9 ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν * πιστός ἐστιν καὶ δίκαιος ἵνα ἀφῇ ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας * καθαρίσῃ ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας
1:10 ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν * ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτόν * ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν	2:1f. ἐάν τις ἁμάρτῃ * παράκλητον ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα, 'Ιησοῦν Χριστὸν δίκαιον * αὐτὸς ἱλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν

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The verses in the first column clearly parallel one another as do the verses in the second column; this is indicated by the introductory

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24 H. Ljungvik connects δίκαιον with παράκλητον and translates "Men om nagon syndar, har vi en föresprakare hos Fadern i Jesus Kristus, en föresprakare, som är rättfärdig." See his 'Oversättningsförslag och sprakliga förklaringar till skilda ställen i Nya Testamentet', *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok* 30 (1965), 120.

25 S. Lyonnet and L. Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption, and Sacrifice* (Rome, 1970), 153.

26 It is precisely his death as a sacrifice for sin that constitutes his advocacy. See B. Lindars, 'Jesus as Advocate: A Contribution to the Christology Debate', *BJRL* 62 (1980), 496.

27 *Pace* Morris, *op. cit.*, 178f. and Hill, *op. cit.*, 37.

28 *Op. cit.*, 149f.

formulae and the repeated refrains that we have asterisked. The columns themselves contrast with one another, but our concern is to note that in column II ἱλασμός parallels καθαρίζει, ἀφῇ, καθαρίσῃ and means again cleanse from sin, forgive sin by the death (τὸ αἷμα) of Christ. The initiative belongs as previously to God, for before we loved him αὐτὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ ἀπέστειλεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἱλασμόν (1 Jn. 4:10).[29]

The general language of the promises listed in column II above is also very reminiscent of the Day of Atonement ritual as we have previously seen with Rom. 3:25 and Heb. 2:17. As parallel to 1 Jn. 1:7, 9; 2:1f. we may refer to Lev. 16:16, 30, 34. The Septuagint renders these latter verses as follows: ἐξιλάσεται ... περὶ πασῶν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν; ἐξιλάσεται περὶ ὑμῶν καθαρίσαι ὑμᾶς ἀπό πασῶν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν; ἐξιλάσκεσθαι περὶ τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραήλ ἀπὸ πασῶν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν. We should note the plural of ἁμαρτία in these verses and Heb. 2:17 for outside the ritual of the Day of Atonement the form that is generally found in the cult is the singular.[30]

It may at this point be objected that we have only demonstrated that sin is always contextually related in all the occurrences of ἱλάσκεσθαι and cognates in the New Testament, but have not thereby eliminated the thought that the ἱλασκ. group carries the idea that God placates his own wrath which man's sin deserves. The wrath of God is certainly not an impersonal force outside of God's immediate control, but neither is it a disposition in God (*affectus*); it is an act of God against sin (*effectus*), his judgment.[31] In the sense of judgment against sin God's wrath was manifest at the cross (Rom. 8:3) and is still being revealed from heaven against all sin (Rom. 1:18). That the death of Christ is the judgment of God against the world's sin does not mean that the wrath of God was appeased at Calvary. To the contrary God's wrath is still active now against sin (Rom. 1:18; 4:5)[32] and will be at the last day (Rom. 2:5; 5:9).

The argument in Rom. 1:18-3:20 is not that God's wrath, which had long been descending upon sin, has now at last found a demanded appeasement in the cross, but rather that God's judgment is now pronounced actively over all men's sin, both Jew and Gentile. This eschatological revelation of divine judgment on the sin of both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 11:32) is an event within the gospel precisely because a new act of universal expiation and acquittal has occurred. The language of Rom. 3:25 does not avert God's wrath, but allows it to justly fall on all men, Jew and Gentile, who refuse Christ as ἱλαστήριον διὰ πίστεως. Previously

29 *Cf.* 1 Jn. 4:14, ὁ πατὴρ ἀπέσταλκεν τὸν υἱὸν σωτῆρα τοῦ κόσμου.
30 H. Montiefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (London, 1964), 38.
31 R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (New York, 1955), 288.
32 James L. Price, 'God's Righteousness Shall Prevail', *Interpretation* 28 (1974), 266f.

God had abandoned (παρέδωκεν) the Gentiles to their lusts, but now his judgment is revealed against all such unrighteousness for the very reason that the new universal event of mercy in the cross — to which all men are called to respond — has been manifested.

The ἱλασκ. word group in the NT asserts just as vividly as καταλλάσσειν and cognates that reconciliation,

> precedes any effort — indeed any knowledge — on man's part, and 'reconciliation' does not mean a subjective process within man but an objective factual salvation brought about by God.[33]

The ἱλάσκεσθαι just as much as the καταλλάσσειν 'is a work ... *outside of us,* in which God so deals in Christ with the sin of the world, that it shall no longer be a barrier between Himself and men'.[34] It seems inappropriate to describe such a divine event of expiation of man's sin within the midst of history and man's estrangement, sub-personal.[35]

Nicole concludes his study with this challenging question:

> 'Who requires expiation or purification, and why?' If the answer be 'God does, in the exercise of his righteousness', we are back to the traditional view, entirely consonant with the carefully avoided term 'propitiation'. If the answer be 'Man does, for the satisfaction of his moral needs', we are faced with a view of salvation which is so greatly at variance with the biblical conception on so many points, that one is truly surprised to see its upholders attempt to harmonize their position with Scripture . . .

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The question is badly put and throws us into an unnecessary dilemma. We need to re-phrase the question and ask, 'What demanded the expiation?' and the answer would be, 'Man's sin and consequent alienation from God.' Which invites the question, 'Who provided the expiation?' and the answer 'God, through his mercy, in the death of Christ.'[36]

The ἱλάσκεσθαι word group refers to the new situation that Christ's death has established; it moves in the sphere of an objective change in circumstances and as such, in most cases, both 'propitiation' and 'expiation' are somewhat misleading. Perhaps 'atone', 'atonement' may be more serviceable choices.

The *immediate* contexts do not speak of wrath, certainly not the placating of wrath; assertions to the contrary are arbitrary and

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[33] Bultmann, *op. cit.,* 286.

[34] James Denney, *The Death of Christ* (New York, 1902), 145.

[35] Morris, *op. cit.,* 201.

[36] If we insist on asking further questions we may come to the same impasse that O.T. scholarship has come in explaining why blood expiates in the Levitical cult. The ideas of R. P. C. Hanson concerning the costly nature of forgiveness are helpful (in *Mystery and Imagination* (London, 1976), 31-53).

unconvincing. The investigation of the actual contexts discovers that ἱλάσκεσθαι and cognates speak either of a divine act of disposal of sin (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 8:12; 1 Jn. 4:10) prior to any human response though demanding a response, or of the guarantee of divine grace and mercy to the sinner in his need (Lk. 18:13; 1 Jn. 2:2).