

EXPIATION, PROPITIATION, MERCY SEAT (*HILASTERION*)

3. *Hilasterion* in Paul

3.1. *Propitiation and Expiation*

...

Other statements in Paul regarding the death of Christ can be brought to bear on [Romans 3:25](#). God “condemned sin in the flesh” of Christ on the cross so that sinners might be released from the condemnation of the Law ([Rom 8:3](#)). In his death Christ “became a curse” ([Gal 3:13](#)) and suffered the condemnation of God’s Law on sinners, for the sinless Christ was “made sin” ([2 Cor 5:21](#)) by God, that is, he was caused to stand in the place of sinners. In the view of J. Denney (103), these statements support propitiation because they take Christ’s death as divine judgment against sin, judgment which is necessary in order “for God to be at once righteous and a God who accepts as righteous those who believe in Jesus.”

Yet Denney wrongly defines divine judgment against sin in terms of propitiation. While it is true that Paul can view Christ’s death as the execution of the Law’s condemnation which fell on sinners in Christ and as God’s own condemnation of sin by delivering the one “made sin” unto death and utter destruction, on the other hand Paul never interprets that divine judgment of sin on the cross as something which appeases an angry, offended God or which inclines God toward sinners. For Paul, God has *always* been inclined toward the ungodly. This is supremely evident in the cross, where “God is in Christ” bearing the transgressions of the world ([2 Cor 5:19](#)) and where the love of God is demonstrated “while we were yet sinners” ([Rom 5:8](#)). Paul interprets the cross as God’s own suffering of the divine judgment against sin, which is the destruction of the sinner’s sinful existence that took place in Christ’s death.¹

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While the wrath of God is the horrible cloud which hovers over the existence of all sinners and from which they escape only by receiving the gift of God’s righteousness in Christ, Paul does not specify here how Christ’s death frees them from such a destiny. He does not define the cross in terms of the wrath of God. Paul probably did conceive of Christ’s death as the anticipation of the final eschatological judgment and outpouring of divine wrath. And thus he also probably did think that those who are in Christ will be saved from that wrath because Christ suffered it for them on the cross. [Romans 5:9](#) is compatible with this explanation: “Having now been justified by his blood, we will be saved through him from the wrath.” But that still does not mean that Christ’s death propitiated God. For Paul the wrath of God is God’s judgment (see [Rom 2:5](#); [3:5–6](#)) which destroys all unholiness and sin. In the light of the threatening wrath of God, the need of sinners can be said to be not *the transformation of God’s attitude toward them*

¹Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 281 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

but the transformation of *their sinful existence before God* through its destruction and new creation. This transformation of sinners is precisely the significance Paul sees in the death and resurrection of Christ. And the notion of divine wrath as a judgment consisting in destruction fits well with such a view of the cross. Paul, however, gives us no systematic presentation of the relationship between sin, Christ's death and God's judgment, and the theological questions we might have in that regard can hardly be answered from his letters.²

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In summary, not "propitiatory" but "expiatory" is the more appropriate description of Christ's atoning death as a *hilastērion* since (1) expiation clearly fits the Pauline understanding of that death as God's own gracious initiative in love toward the ungodly (see further below) as well as God's judgment against sin, (2) the idea of the appeasing of a wrathful God is in tension with Paul's understanding of Christ's death, (3) the context of [Romans 3:25](#) does not require propitiation, and (4) the usage of the *hilask-* word group in the [LXX](#) suggests a development of meaning toward the connotations of expiation.³

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Given the weakness of the counterarguments and alternatives, the dominance of the meaning "mercy seat" for *hilastērion* in the [LXX](#), and the Jewish-Christian provenance of the pre-Pauline tradition in which this term is embedded in [Romans 3:25](#), it is likely that *hilastērion* here means "mercy seat."

The use of *hilastērion* to describe Christ crucified as a new "mercy seat" thus shows that the traditional material interpreted his death in terms of cultic atonement. Specifically, the Day of Atonement ritual in [Leviticus 16](#) is the theological key to this view of Christ's death, as especially O. Hofius (1989, 39–48) has argued, drawing on H. Gese's and B. Janowski's insights into the OT material. Key elements of Paul's understanding of Christ's death can be linked to this ritual: the atoning death of Christ as an act of God (cf. [Lev 17:11](#)), the presence of God in Christ on the cross as reconciler, "inclusive substitution" as the basis of Christ's death for sinners, atonement as a "coming to God through judgment of death," and reconciliation as a new creation.⁴

²Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 282 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

[LXX](#)Septuagint

³Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 282 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

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⁴Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 283 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).