

“Atoning Sacrifice” in 1 John

Charles Gourgey, Ph.D.

I once suggested to a class that every translation of the Bible should come with a warning label. Here is one example.

Chapter 4 of the First Letter of John plays a central role in New Testament theology. In this chapter we see the author emerging from his contentious struggle with a breakaway sect to reach the conclusion that the essence of God is love, which is an answer to our fears. Along the way there is one verse that seems out of place and may, to some, seem jarring:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10, NRSV)

This would appear to imply the doctrine of penal substitution, which holds that Jesus died on the cross as punishment for the sins of all the rest of us, which he willingly agreed to take upon himself. This doctrine is controversial and much debated. One may wonder whether the idea of punishing the innocent for the sins of the guilty fits well in the author’s exposition of love.

The New American Standard Bible, reputed to be perhaps the most faithful and literal translation of the New Testament in English, goes even further:

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

The word “propitiation” comes from a Latin word meaning “to appease.” It means to mollify an angry deity, to avoid becoming the object of divine wrath. This does seem odd in the middle of a discourse on love.

So let’s take a look behind the phrase to see what might really be going on.

First, casting Jesus as an atonement sacrifice is incongruous in this letter. In the Gospel of John, produced by the community from which our letter comes, Jesus is likened to the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. That sacrifice has nothing to do with atonement or propitiation, but salvation

from slavery and oppression in Egypt. It indicates not God's anger but God's mercy.

Second, the doctrine of penal substitution is not even biblical. The New Testament does not teach it, even though some translations misleadingly give the impression that it does. It evolved over a course of time after the New Testament and reaches its clearest expression in John Calvin.

And regarding propitiation, here is what the *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* by Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, a tool scholars use to study New Testament Greek vocabulary, has to say. (Please don't mind the Greek in this quotation; you won't need it to get the main point.)

Though some traditional translations render ἰλαστήριον as “propitiation,” this involves a wrong interpretation of the term in question. Propitiation is essentially a process by which one does a favor to a person in order to make him or her favorably disposed, but in the NT God is never the object of propitiation since he is already on the side of people. ἰλασμός and ἰλαστήριον denote the means of forgiveness and not propitiation.

So “propitiation” is not a good translation and we can dispense with it. What about the NRSV's “atoning sacrifice”? The main problem here is that *the word “sacrifice” is not in the Greek*, and implies something that is not stated. Let us now see why.

The word in question is ἰλασμός, *ilasmos*, rendered “propitiation” in the NASB and “atoning sacrifice” in the NRSV. The main point of this essay is to question rendering *ilasmos* as “sacrifice,” which I believe is incorrect and misleading.

So what does this word actually mean? If a word is obscure, the usual way to determine its meaning is to examine all the places where it is used, then judge from the context. In the New Testament this word occurs only twice, both times in 1 John (2:2 and 4:10). But the word does occur several times in the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures used by the New Testament writers.

In some contexts *ilasmos* can refer to atonement, but not to the actual sacrifice. In Leviticus 25:9 it occurs in the phrase ἡμέρα τοῦ ἰλασμοῦ, “Day of Atonement,” and in Numbers 5:8 it appears in κριοῦ τοῦ ἰλασμοῦ, “ram of atonement,” an offering one brings in restitution for a wrong committed against another. In both cases *ilasmos* translates the Hebrew כִּפּוּרִים (*kippurim*, from which we get Yom Kippur, “Day of Atonement”), which does not mean sacrifice.

Now this word *kippurim* is very interesting. It comes from כִּפֶּה, *kipper*, to atone, but literally “to cover over.” When one atones, one’s sins are “covered over” as if they did not exist. From this word we also get כַּפֹּת, *kapporet*, the golden cover over the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies inside the Temple. The blood of the sin offering was sprinkled over this cover by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Symbolically, the high priest was in contact with God in this gesture to atone for the sins of the people. In his translation of the Bible Martin Luther called the *kapporet* “Gnadenstuhl,” meaning “seat of grace.” Translating this into English, William Tyndale called it the “mercy seat,” and so it has been rendered in most English Christian Bibles ever since.

In short, in these contexts *ilasmos* does not mean sacrifice but rather *place of God’s mercy*.¹ Thus nowhere in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures does *ilasmos* designate an “atoning sacrifice.”² So translating *ilasmos* as “atoning sacrifice” says too much and is reading into the text a post-biblical theology.

If further evidence is needed, another occurrence of *ilasmos* in the Septuagint is illuminating. It is Psalm 130:4, “But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.” In the Greek, “forgiveness” here is *ilasmos*. But the Hebrew word that it translates is סְלִיחָה, *selihah*, which does not mean sacrifice but forgiveness, mercy.

¹ It is worth noting that a word related to *ilasmos*, ἰλαστήριον (*ilasterion*), is used in the Septuagint to mean what we call the “mercy seat” but is often translated, in my opinion incorrectly, as “sacrifice of atonement” in Romans 3:25. The very same word in Hebrews 9:5 is usually translated correctly as “mercy seat.”

² In one instance in the Septuagint (Ezekiel 44:27) *ilasmos* appears to refer to the purification offering a priest brings after ritual defilement from contact with the dead. But that is not an “atoning sacrifice” since the priest committed no sin. It is also an exceptional case.

Finally, just as an additional note, in Luke 18:13, the words of the repentant tax collector: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” The word translated “be merciful” is ἰλάσθητί, *ilastheti*, “be merciful,” and is related to *ilamos*. In fact, *ilamos* and related words all derive from ἰλεως, *ileos*, to be merciful, as in Hebrews 12:8: “For I will be merciful (ἰλεως) toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

Conclusion

If we look at how the word *ilamos*, usually translated “atoning sacrifice” or, even worse, “propitiation” in 1 John, is used in the Greek scriptures, we can see that it usually denotes mercy rather than sacrifice. Thus it would be better to translate the word something like “place of God’s mercy.”³ So 1 John 2:2 becomes:

And he is the manifestation of mercy for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

And 1 John 4:10 becomes:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the place of that mercy for our sins.

This fits much better the overall premise of the letter, especially as recorded in chapter 4, which presents the author’s key argument. The acrimonious schism with the Docetists has prompted our author to contemplate the meaning of love and its importance for community. In chapter 4 he says that God’s love teaches us how to love, and that love removes fear and enables us to face judgment:

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. (1 John 4:17)

In other words, we can become like Christ when transformed by love, and we can face judgment successfully *because love perfects us and conforms us to the image of Christ*. Calling Jesus an “atoning sacrifice” negates this idea, since according to that doctrine we don’t really overcome our

³ In Romans 3:25 the NRSV offers “place of atonement” as an alternative to “sacrifice of atonement.”

depravity but can face judgment only because Christ took the punishment for our sins.

The two ideas could hardly be more different. Are we saved because even though we are unreformable sinners Christ suffered in our place? Or are we saved because the love Christ demonstrated enters our hearts, transforms us, and makes us innocent in God's sight as well as open to the love of God and others? I believe the intention of this text is the latter, born out in its exposition, which calling Jesus an "atoning sacrifice" actually disrupts. The author's is a beautiful idea beautifully expressed, and deserves to be appreciated in its own right.

The implications for our spiritual life are profound. The doctrine of penal substitution requires nothing of us but a profession of faith, which may or may not change us inwardly. But the infusion of God's love into our hearts is something else entirely. We make God's love our dwelling place, immerse ourselves in it and allow it to change us. In the words favored by the Johannine community, we *abide* in that love:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. (John 15:4)

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1 John 4:16)

This is a very different understanding of salvation from the construal of Jesus as an "atoning sacrifice." The Gospel and Letters of John give us a unique way of understanding the path to God, and of *soteriology*, the way of salvation. In it there is no punishment of the innocent to save the guilty, no "propitiating" the wrath of an angry God. There is just God's love, with the power to change the world – if only we *abide* in it, and let it into our hearts.

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