

"Propitiation/atonement": LXX background to a NT verb

By Edward Fudge

In Hebrews 2:17, the unknown author says that Jesus identified with his people as their high priest, “to make propitiation” for their sins. The Greek verb here (*hilaskomai*), which many English versions translate as “to make propitiation,” brings to the New Testament an interesting biblical background. That background comes from the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament that was the first “Bible” of the early church.

Propitiation = atonement

The verb *hilaskomai*, which is translated “to make propitiation” in Hebrews 2:17, appears 12 times in the Septuagint (Hatch-Redpath, 684). Three of those times, it translates the Hebrew verb *kaphar*, itself usually translated “to make atonement.” The Hebrew verb *kaphar* originally meant “to cover” or perhaps “to wash away” (*TDNT*, Vol. III, 302). By biblical times, however, it generally meant “to forgive” (*IDB*, Vol. 1, 310).

Interestingly, the Septuagint never uses *hilaskomai* in the active sense of someone “making propitiation” or “making atonement.” It always uses this verb in the passive sense, either of God being favorably disposed toward someone, or of not being favorably disposed toward someone. Wherever the Septuagint uses *hilaskomai*, English Bibles regularly say “forgive” or “pardon.” When the tax-collector in Jesus’ parable begs for mercy, Luke uses *hilaskomai* in that same passive sense to report the fact (Luke 18:13).

However, *exilaskomai*, a more intensive form of *hilaskomai* (the verb used in Hebrews 2:17), appears nearly 90 times in the Septuagint. More than 75 of those times, this second (almost identical) verb also translates the usual Hebrew verb for making atonement (Hatch-Redpath, 495-496). In the places where the Septuagint uses this intensive verb form (*exilaskomai*), English Bibles almost always say “make atonement.”

Given this background in the Greek Old Testament, it is not surprising that some English versions translate Hebrews 2:17 to say that Jesus Christ made “atonement” (NIV) or “a sacrifice of atonement” (NRSV) instead of saying that he made “propitiation.”

Does ‘propitiation’ turn aside anger?

But does the act of making “propitiation” (which the Greek Old Testament uses interchangeably with making “atonement”) convey the idea in the Septuagint of appeasing anger? A reading of relevant passages reveals that it does so on a few occasions, but only rarely.

In two of the 12 places where the Septuagint uses the Greek verb (*hilaskomai*) translated as “make propitiation” in Hebrews 2:17, the context clearly indicates a turning away of God’s anger (Exodus 32:14; Lamentations 3:42). However, in the Hebrew text, neither of those passages uses the regular verb (*kaphar*) for making atonement. When the Septuagint does use *hilaskomai* to translate the Hebrew verb for making atonement (*kaphar*), the passage always identifies God’s reputation, compassion or kindness as the motivation for him to be favorably disposed toward (and to forgive) the person involved. In one such passage, God’s anger is mentioned but does not need to be appeased. Before his anger rises, God remembers that his erring people are mortal and forgives their sins (Psalm 78:38-39 [LXX 77:38-39]).

When we consider *exilaskomai*, the intensive form of this Greek verb (not used in the New Testament), the contrast is even more dramatic. With nearly 90 occurrences in the Septuagint, this verb almost always has an active sense (“to make atonement”). Only three contexts clearly involve appeasement of anger, whether God’s (Numbers 16:46 [LXX 17:11]) or man’s (Genesis 32:20 [LXX 32:21]; Proverbs 16:14). Twice else the context suggests the notion of placating anger, but that meaning is not certain (Exodus 32:30; Numbers 31:50).

About one time in four when the Septuagint speaks of making “atonement,” the problem being remedied is not sin but is ceremonial uncleanness. The Mosaic Law required propitiation/atonement to be made, not only for people’s sins, but also for mothers after childbirth, menstrual women, men with bodily discharges, people with specified diseases, tabernacle furniture, the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement and mold-infested buildings. Although this uncleanness must be remedied by making “propitiation/atonement,” there is no suggestion in these situations of divine anger or of its removal.

Conclusion

When the writer of Hebrews needed a Greek word to say that Jesus made “propitiation,” he chose the verb *hilaskomai*, which in the Septuagint always meant “to forgive” or “to pardon.” And the Septuagint regularly used *exilaskomai*, the intensive, almost-identical form of this verb whenever the Hebrew Bible reported a priestly act “to make atonement.” This biblical background in the Septuagint justifies the translation “to make atonement” in Hebrews 2:17.

Sometimes in the Septuagint the act of making propitiation/atonement specifically includes the notion of placating anger. Whether that is the case or not must be determined by the context, since that notion is not necessarily present in the words *hilaskomai* or *exhilaskomai* themselves.

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