CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CONCORDANCE AND TECHNICAL TERMINOLOGY IN DE TRANSLATIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to pursue a second matter that emerged from Chapter 11's examination of the way DE translations deal with the ST. We will consider the issue of 'concordance' and the handling of technical terminology. In order to limit the scope of this section of our investigation, we will undertake a case study. An obvious area to explore is the translation of the sacrifical/cultic terminology that is very common in the Bible, but very foreign—indeed, even repugnant—to most Western minds. It will therefore be a significant litmus test of DE translation in practice

A. BIBLICAL WORD STUDIES AND MODERN SEMANTICS

In the previous chapter we have discussed the significance of the Septuagint as the version of the OT most commonly used by the NT writers and the Christian community of the first centuries. Its influence is seen in over a thousand quotations and several thousand clear allusions; in the Biblical style of some NT writers and in the inherited theological vocabulary that they utilised. It is to the last of these that we shall now turn.

The Jewish writers of the NT did not have to invent a Greek theological vocabulary; such a vocabulary lay ready at hand in the Septuagint. A number of commentators have pointed out how the Alexandrine translators of the LXX took over pagan religious terminology in the translation of the Hebrew Bible with the result that in Greek-speaking Jewish circles these words acquired new significance from the Hebrew vocabulary that they represented or from the new context in which they were set.[1] The opening chapters of C.H. Dodd's *The Bible and the Greeks* contained many examples of the modification of Greek terms through their use in the LXX. Similarly the attention drawn by F.F. Bruce to the Greek word νόμος and the change in connotation it has undergone to translate תורה has been observed in the previous chapter. This connotation has been retained in NT writings.[2]

---

[1] C.H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935; L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale, 1955); D.W. Gooding, 'Text and Versions', in *NBD* ed. J.D. Douglas (London: IVF, 1962); D.W. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings. Studies in Semantics of Soteriological Terms*, (CUP, 1967); H. M. Shires, *Finding the Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).

[2] F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 3rd ed revised, (London: Pickering & Inglis , 1971) 159-161; cf. S. Ullman, *Semantics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) 165 (demonstration of the influence of Hebrew on Greek and later on Latin).

A similar phenomenon took place with regard to names and titles of divine beings, as well as words such as 'grace', 'truth', 'life', 'peace', 'salvation' and 'heaven', all of which have a long history in the OT, and to cultic terminology. It is commonly claimed that "almost every key theological word of the New Testament is derived from some Hebrew word that had a long history of use and development in the Old Testament".[3] Thus there has been much investigation of the background of the words of the NT and their roots in the OT. Kittel and Friedrich's nine volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [4] is the most famous. However, it must be acknowledged that such word studies have not always satisfied those with some training in descriptive linguistics.

In view of the claims being made in this chapter concerning the significance for biblical interpretation and translation of the NT writers' usage of LXX terminology, some brief attention must be given first to modern developments in Semantics as they bear on our topic.

The relevance of semantics to biblical interpretation was demonstrated decisively in 1961 with the publication of James Barr's book, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*.[5] Barr, at that time Professor of OT Literature at the University of Edinburgh, was concerned about unsound linguistic methods prevalent in biblical scholarship. His criticisms, supported by a wealth of examples taken from commentaries, word studies and theological works, focused on faulty lexicography and on the idea that the grammar of a language reflected a people's world-view (in particular what differences of language structure between Greek and Hebrew correlated with the differences in philosophical orientation or personality types found in those cultures). Among the false assumptions he attacked was the view that the word, rather than the sentence or speech-act, constituted the basic unit of meaning to be investigated, and that questions about etymology somehow relate to the real or basic meaning of a word. He advocated the "semantic field" approach associated with the name of Trier. This approach, which Barr utilized in a subsequent book, *Biblical Words for Time*,[6] involves the study, not of one word, but of a group, in which each element can be stated by delimitation against the other; the meaning is the choice of this word against that. Although the study of semantics can be approached from the side of philosophy as well as linguistics, James Barr and subsequent writers who have sought to apply these

3   I.H. Marshall, "Culture and the New Testament" (unpublished, 1977b) 13, 16.
4   G. Kittel & G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* , translated & edited by G.W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1967-1976).
5   J. Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).
6   J. Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (SBT 33, 2nd ed, London: SCM ,1969)

principles to biblical interpretation (e.g. John Sawyer 1972[7]) have drawn their insights from linguistics, and particularly from the structural approach to language inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure.

Ever keen to make available to exegetes, and to translators especially, the fruits of linguistic developments, Nida himself in conjuction with J.P. Louw has produced *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testmanet Based on Semantic Domains.*[8] A companion volume elaborates the methodological approach that lies behind the lexical judgements.[9] Louw and Nida's Lexicon, which was not available to translators of the versions we are investigating, provides definitions and information about a word's field of meaning that is often lacking in other lexicons.

A comparison with the method of a standard Greek Lexicon, such as Arndt and Gingrich,[10] is helpful. For example, for κύριος BAGD divides the range of meaning into two main categories: 1. "Owner" of impersonal possession or of a slave, "master" or "lord". 2. Designation of person of high position - "Lord", - or as a title of respect - "sir". Religious usage indicated Lord used of God, of deified kings, Jesus and other supernatural beings like angels.[11]

In Louw and Nida's Lexicon the range of meanings is listed in the index volume II under the entry, κύριος: Lord, owner, ruler and sir (2:149). The domain reference numbers listed indicate that each meaning comes from a different domain. "Lord" belongs to the domain of words indicating supernatural beings and powers (12:9). The definition in volume I identifies this as a title for God or Christ, indicating 'one who exercises supernatural authority over mankind' (1:139). The second meaning,

---

[7]   J.F.A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research,* (London: SCM, 1972). C.R. Taber, 'Semantics', *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 800-7. A.C. Thistleton, 'Semantics and New Testament Interpretation' in New Testament Interpretation: *Essays on Principles and Methods,* ed. I.H. Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977) 75-104. J.P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Semeia Studies; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). M. Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983, revised 1994). P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation,* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989). E.A. Nida and J.P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992). S.E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). D.A. Campbell, *The Rhetoric of Righteousness in Romans 3:21-26* JSNT Supplement 65 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

[8]   J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols) (New York: UBS, 1988).

[9]   E.A. Nida and J.P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

[10] W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, & F. Danker (abbreviated BAGD), *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 2nd English edition, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979).

[11] W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, & F. Danker (abbreviated BAGD), *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 2nd English edition, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979) 459-461.

"owner", occurs in the domain of words that express ownership or possession (57:12). Here the definition of κύριος is 'one who owns and controls property, including especially servants and slaves, with important supplementary components of high status and respect'; "owner", "master" and "lord" serve as good glosses (1:559). κύριος meaning "ruler" occurs in the group of words used to indicate control or rule and in the subdomain focusing on ruling or governing other people (37:51). When κύριος means "sir" (87:53) it belongs to the domain of words indicating status and the subdomain expressing high status or rank, e.g., a title of respect used in addressing a man - sir, mister (1:739). Volume I provides both the specific domain for each of these meanings and a precise definition of each meaning.

There is much that is creative and helpful in Louw and Nida's Lexicon. But it needs to be used in conjunction with BAGD which provides more extensive reference for each Greek entry, often in fact including every NT occurrence of a word. A theoretical question with regard to Nida and Louw's semantic domains concerns their objective status. To what degree are these categories based on the grammar of the Greek lexicon and to what extent on the linguist's (English) intuitive understanding of the lexical items?

In view of Barr's ruthless criticisms of many of the articles in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, one might be tempted to doubt the value of word study altogether. But word study as such is not his target. His real complaint was against what he called 'illegitimate totality transfer'.[12] By this he meant the reading into a word in a particular context of the sum total of the semantic values that it has in all its occurrences. Thus he takes the word ἐκκλησία (church) and considers its meaning on the basis of various usages in the NT. Preachers and writers expound the word as meaning "the Christian assembly", "the body of Christ", "the Bride of Christ", "the first instalment of the Kingdom", etc. There may be a sense in which this is the 'meaning' of ἐκκλησία but all these meanings drawn from different contexts cannot be lumped together and assume to be the meaning of ἐκκλησία in each of its particular occurrences, e.g. in Matt 16:18. Barr successfully demonstrates that in a number of articles in Kittel's Dictionary[13] it is erroneously assumed that words carry with them all the meanings which they may have in other sets of co-occurrences.[14]

---

[12] J. Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 218.

[13] G. Kittel & G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, translated & edited by G.W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1967-76.

[14] cf. E.A. Nida, 'Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship', *JBL* 91 (1972) 86.

Word studies as such are not to be dismissed as valueless. 'There is usually in each word a hard core of meaning which is relatively stable and can only be modified by the context within certain limits.'[15]

R.H. Robins wisely observed that words may be convenient units about which to state meanings 'provided that it is borne in mind that words have meaning by virtue of their employment in sentences…and that the meaning of a sentence is not to be thought of as a sort of summation of the meanings of its component words taken individually.'[16] Much, too, inevitably depends on the type of words that we have in mind. Words normally have a number of different senses and it is the context which makes clear which sense is uppermost in a particular occurrence. Most words have a 'primary' sense that comes to the mind of native speakers when they hear it in isolation. It is the sense least conditioned by the context. What the translator has to keep in mind, however, is that the senses which a word has in one language seldom match the senses of the 'equivalent' word in another language. Even when the primary sense matches, different words may have to be used to express the 'secondary' senses. However, there are some words which seem to have only one (e.g. "Messiah"), or at least a relatively stable conceptual nucleus. Cultic terminology of the type we shall be discussing would be in this category.

As we turn to examine the selected cultic terminology, the lessons of modern linguistics must be kept in mind. Full justice must be done to the *context* in which the terms are used, both the immediate linguistic environment as well as the wider literary context—in this case the whole biblical corpus. Linguistics would further stress the importance of the non-verbal context, that is the historical situation in which a term has been understood. In the case of biblical literature one could imaginatively reconstruct a bewildering number of situational contexts of particular literary units. One could read certain Psalms in the light of original Enthronement Of Yahweh Festivals or in the context of the liturgical religious communities that have read, sung, listened to, or studied them, up to the present time. One of the refreshing new trends in biblical research is to examine the later historical contexts, and 'corruptions' of the text with the same objectivity and enthusiasm as the postulated 'original' situational context in Israel's life. The biblical text is seen as the result of a cumulative process possibly involving many layers of tradition. The semanticist (translator, commentator or lexicographer) can 'freeze' the process and describe the meaning of the text in whichever period he chooses. The essential thing is that he makes it clear at the outset exactly what he is doing. It is one of the benefits of recent approaches to biblical

---

15 S. Ullman, *Semantics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) 49.
16 R.H. Robins, *General Linguistics*, (London: Longmans 1964) 22.

interpretation that they take seriously the final form of the biblical text as a valid linguistic environment on the basis of which semantic statements can be made. Accordingly, we shall be commenting on the biblical text in its final form without delving into possible *Sitze im Leben* of particular passages unless these are explicitly described by the text itself.

Furthermore, in any semantic statements the priority of synchronic description must be observed. As James Barr said with reference to diachronic studies, 'The main point is that the etymology of a word is not a statement about its meaning but about its history.'[17] Nor does one have to be a linguist to recognise that language, including biblical languages, has a history and that words change their meanings. This is even true of the Hebrew text of the OT which was written down over a number of centuries. Thus we read in 1 Sam 9:9 that ראה (seer) is an archaic form subsequently replaced by נביא (prophet). Again in 2 Sam 5:20 David can use בעל in the place name *Baal-perazim* in its meaning of 'lord', but by the time of the later prophet Hosea, the term had become so associated with idolatry as to be taboo among the redeemed Israel (Hos 2:16, 17). On the other hand, one does not have to be such a relativist as to deny the possibility of continuity throughout history. This is particularly important when one considers the literary and poetic use of language, where usage is more self conscious than in ordinary speech and writing. Poets or novelists hardly ever write spontaneously. Their use of language is normally accompanied by a certain amount of reflection on language itself.[18]

Furthermore there are cases where the etymology of a word is not just a fascinating distraction but an important part of semantic description. A word no longer in use in any living language, not attested in enough contexts to make synchronic description possible, and not occurring in a bilingual text, cannot be described in any other way.[19] Barr criticized preachers who exploit the etymology of a word for homiletic purposes, not least where too much is read into dead metaphors. For instance, the Greek verb σπλαγχνίζομαι 'to show compassion' is said to be particularly powerful because σπλάγχνα means 'internal organs'. But in the Gospels the Greek metaphor probably no longer had any more force than our English verb 'to lose heart'. Another favourite of preachers is the Greek word ὑπηρέτης (literally, the under-rower of a ship) which probably simply means 'assistant' or 'servant' when Paul says, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ" (1 Cor 4:1). Occasionally someone uses diachronic investigation in a way that leads to sheer anachronism, as when we are told that μαρτύριον (witness) has the basic meaning of 'martyrdom', or worse still,

---

17 J. Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 109.
18 B. Siertsema, 'Language and World View', *TBT* 20 (1969) 8.
19 J.F.A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research*, (London: SCM, 1972) 90.

that δύναμις in the NT properly means 'dynamite'![20] I would suggest that Nida himself is guilty of imaginative etymologizing when he translates εὐαγγέλιον (gospel), as 'good news'. This is a popular interpretation influenced by the etymology of our English word 'gospel', but it is difficult to defend it on the basis of synchronic description within the context of the NT writings themselves.[21] Yet the GNB translates εὐαγγέλιον by 'good news' even in Rev 14:6, where its context is "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgement has come".

However, these popular misuses of etymology, rightly scorned by linguists, should alert us to the possibility that such self-conscious use of language, and etymology in particular, may be found in ancient texts, too. In the case of biblical Hebrew, Sawyer has drawn attention to the possibility that a distinctive type of morphological motivation operates due to the structure of the language. He points to the relatively small number of morphological patterns; the remarkable stability of the transconsonantal root; the consonantal script and the frequency of folk etymologies, as reason to allow for etymological motivation more developed than in the Indo-European languages.[22] The suggestion is worthy of further investigation. Certainly Paul, writing in Greek, exploits the Hebrew etymology of 'Jew' when he says in Rom 2:29, "He is a Jew who is one inwardly...His praise is not from men but from God".

With the above caveat we are prepared to observe the warnings of writers such as Barr. In the study of our chosen terminology any historical information must be subsidiary to a synchronic study of the contexts where the terms under discussion occur.

B. CONCORDANCE IN TRANSLATION

DE translation theory emphasises that contextual consistency has priority over verbal consistency or word-for-word concordance.[23] Since in different languages the semantic areas of corresponding words are not identical, it is inevitable that the choice of the right word in the RL text to translate a word in the ST depends more on context than verbal consistency.[24] Nida's favourite example is the Greek word σάρξ which in the FC translations is consistently rendered "flesh"—a translation which he says

---

20 A.C. Thiselton, 'Semantics and New Testament Interpretation', in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I.H. Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977) 81.
21 See the previous discussion of this point in Chapter 11 (p.157f).
22 J.F.A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research*, (London: SCM, 1972) 50.
23 E.A. Nida and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, (Helps for Translators, No.8; Leiden: Brill, 1969) 14-22.
24 E.A. Nida and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, (Helps for Translators, No.8; Leiden: Brill, 1969) 15.

distorts the meaning for it does not express the intended sense in each context.[25] Therefore, following Nida, the GNB translated σάρξ by various terms, e.g. "men" (Acts 2:17, 2 Cor 7:5), "people of my own race" (Rom 11:4), "human nature" (Rom 8:3), "world/worldly" (2 Cor 10:3), "human point of view" (1 Cor 1:26).

As we have seen, the issue is an old one. The translators of the KJV state quite openly their decision, 'We have not tied ourselves to uniformity of phrasing or to an identity of words'. At the time of the preparation of the ERV, the problem was discussed at length and in a book entitled *The Revision of the English Version of the New Testament*[26] Bishop Lightfoot accused the KJV translators of two groups of errors stemming from their espousal of the approach quoted above. In the first place he claimed that various renderings of the same word or words introduced artificial distinctions having no place in the original. In the second place he accused them of obliterating real distinctions by the same rendering of different words.

Some clarification of terminology is in order .[27]

First of all two types of concordance must be distinguished: one relating to concordance within an original text; the other between an original text and its translation. The first refers to the repeated use of the same word or expression to refer to the same specific thing or concept. Beekman and Callow draw attention, however, to 'pseudo-concordance', by which they mean the re-occurrence of the same word but with different senses.

> Distribution of semantic components into word class or system will differ between languages, and the range of variability of semantic usages of a word in different contexts differs radically preventing a one-to-one matching of word-to-word in each of several contexts across two languages.[28]

Thus English assigns at least two meanings to the word 'table'— a kind of furniture, and a different sense in a table of contents. It is conceivable that both usages occur in the same paragraph but we would not expect to find matching translations for both meanings. This is an example of polysemy[29] and hence pseudo-concordance. If we then translate these two senses of 'table' into Bahasa Indonesia as *meja* and *daftar*

---

25 E.A. Nida and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, (Helps for Translators, No.8; Leiden: Brill, 1969) 16 cf. E.A. Nida, *Good News for Everyone: How to Use the Good News Bible*, (Waco: Word Books 1977) 188.

26 J.B. Lightfoot, *The Revision of the English Version of the New Testament* (London 1873).

27 The following treatment owes much to the helpful discussion of "concordance" by J. Beekman and J. Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1974).

28 J. Beekman and J. Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1974) 131.

29 S. Ullman, *Semantics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) 164; G. Leech, *Semantics*, (London: Penguin Books, 1974) 228.

respectively there has been no loss in meaning unless the original text involved a pun (as, for instance, in Amos 8:1 "the basket of summer fruit" which signals "the end" in Hebrew). The loss, if it may be called such, is in the terms of structure of the English lexicon, something that is language specific and arbitrary. The translator should not attempt to reproduce such pseudo-concordance in the RL.

Where an original text exhibits deliberate re-occurrence of the same word with the same sense then this represents real concordance which the translator should seek to reproduce in the RL. Beekman and Callow cite 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul uses the Greek word ἀγάπη (love) no less than eight times to keep his topic in focus and reinforce his theme. This then, is a linguistic feature of form that the translator should seek to carry over into the RL version. More important for our purpose, in view of the subsequent focus on the translation of cultic terminology, is their advocacy of concordant translation of the word 'blood' in the Bible because of the deliberate allusion to OT sacrifices. In apparent criticism of the GNB, they say, 'To translate this symbol 'blood' simply as 'death' loses or at least obscures this designed concordance.'[30]

Sometimes there are, however, problems in maintaining real concordance. If, for instance, the metaphor 'blood' was felt to be misleading in the RL (but this is not the case in English), then the problem could be overcome by using the word 'blood' and 'to die' in a clause. Inevitably difficulties in the lexical structure of languages pose problems which result in either a reduction or gain in the internal concordance of the translation as compared to that of the ST. Beekman and Callow cite Ephesians 4:32 as causing problems in one of the Otomi languages of Mexico. i.e. "Forgive one another as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you". The Greek original, like English, is able to use the same word 'to forgive' in both cases, i.e. χαρίζομαι but in this Otomi language it is unthinkable that the same word could be used of human forgiving and divine forgiving. The same problem exists in Bahasa Indonesia, and earlier Indonesian versions of the Bible were careful to distinguish between *memaafkan* (human forgiving) and *mengampuni* (divine forgiving). However, of three versions in current use, two translate χαρίζομαι by *mengampuni* in both cases, thus retaining the concordance of the ST. It is not clear whether the natural usage is being changed by 'foreign' influence. Whatever the background, it provides another warning to the translator not to slavishly bind himself to what is 'natural'. Languages are not immutable systems and the translation of the Bible can itself be an important influence in language change. A completely concordant translation is impossible. But should

---

30   J. Beekman and J. Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1974) 156.

not the translator seek to reproduce the concordance of the ST unless it is intolerable in the RL?

C. A CASE STUDY: THE TRANSLATION OF SACRIFICIAL TERMINOLOGY IN THE NT

Nida reports that when the GNB was published some readers said that they were shocked not to find the word 'propitiation'.[31] This is one of the traditional salvation words found in the KJV, and S.R. Driver[32] claimed that propitiation was one of the three main categories used in the NT to interpret the death of Christ. It is true that generally such theological understandings of the NT writers are borne by sentences rather than by individual words.[33] Thus to assess Driver's claim with regard to propitiation, one would not restrict the investigation to the occurrence of certain terms but rather note the larger discourse units which refer, for instance, to the wrath of God. Nevertheless, we must assert again the particular importance of technical terms which, however strange and difficult to the modern reader, function as signposts pointing to certain religious presuppositions and to a peculiar historical and social background without which the thinking of the NT writers cannot be understood. Since Nida himself has drawn attention to, and defended, the disappearance of 'blood' and 'propitiation' from the DE translation which he commends, it will provide a suitable case study, on the basis of which we hope some general conclusions can be reached about the translation of OT technical terms in the NT.

The terminology under focus is the ἱλάσκεσθαι word group comprising the verb (ἐξ)ιλάσκομαι and the nouns ἱλασμός and ἱλαστήριον. There are 160 occurrences of these words in the Greek OT (LXX), usually in connection with the sacrificial cultus. There are only six occurrences in the NT (two of each), of which four refer directly to the death of Christ.

Recent English translations, prior to the GNB, had reflected some uncertainty as to whether this terminology was best translated by 'propitiation' or 'expiation'. According to Moulton and Milligan,[34] the ἱλάσκομαι word group in Hellenistic Greek, as in Classical, refers to placating wrath. They interpret ἱλάσκομαι with accusative of the person as 'render propitious to oneself', and go on to note 'a similar use of the compound ἐξιλάσκομαι which extends to the LXX'. Some biblical scholars, however, notably C.H. Dodd, have argued that the notion of propitiation or

---

31   E.A. Nida, 'Translating Means Communication', in *Linguistics and Anthropology* ed. M. Saville-Troike (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1977) 73.
32   S.R. Driver, 'Propitiation', *HDB*, IV [Edinburgh: T & TClark, 1902] 132.
33   J. Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 249.
34   J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1930) sub ἱλάσκομαι.

appeasement is hardly found in biblical Greek, but rather gives way to an impersonal 'expiation' or 'atonement'.[35] He did not suggest a difference in the action performed. Rather, a difference in intention is signified. Propitiation refers to the placating of an angry party—be it divine or human. Expiation, on the other hand, has in view the removal of an offence or compensation for it. A comparison of pre-1935 and post--1935 Bible translations and commentaries testifies to the tremendous influence of Dodd's thesis. Prior to 1935, 'propitiation' is universally accepted; subsequently 'expiation' becomes the norm. Significantly, Dodd was to become chairman of the NEB NT translation project.

Dodd's conclusions, however, were later challenged by Leon Morris, who argued that in a majority of biblical usages, when the context is consulted it is plain that 'the averting of anger seems to represent a stubborn substratum of meaning from which all other usages can be naturally explained.'[36] James Barr is reluctant to allow that the sacrificial system involved any element of 'appeasement of an angry, offended or arbitrary deity', but concedes that in many contexts 'the anger of God falls on Israel when the sin is not expiated so that expiation has a certain apotropaic aspect; it alone turns away the anger of God... it is therefore difficult to carry out the clear distinction of expiation and propitiation.'[37] A painstaking study by David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*,[38] gave cautious support to Morris' criticism of Dodd. In a later *Festschrift* to Morris, Howard Marshall claimed that Morris' 'discussion of the meaning of the *hilaskomai* word group in which he demonstrated that it refers to propitiation rather than expiation, has been confirmed by the work of R. Nicole and D. Hill.'[39]

The GNB sidesteps altogether the expiation/propitiation debate by using a phrase such as 'the means by which men's sins are forgiven.' Nida answers the critics, as follows:

> What these persons did not sense was their own misunderstanding of the meaning of "propitiation" which really refers to the process of "making someone favourably inclined toward another". The English term "propitiation" might be described as a highbrow way of talking about arm-twisting, but there is no need for arm-twisting to get God on man's side. It was God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself; Christ did not have to reconcile God to the world. The Greek noun *hilasmos* and the related verb *hilaskomai* never occur in the New Testament with God as the object, and in 1 John 2:2 it is not the propitiation of sin but the

---

35 C.H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935) 82.
36 L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, (London: Tyndale Press, 1955) 155.
37 J Barr, 'Propitiation', *HDB*, 2nd ed. [Edinburgh: T & TClark, 1963] 810.
38 D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings. Studies in Semantics of Soteriological Terms*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1967).
39 'The Development of the Concept of Redemption in the New Testament', in *Reconciliation and Hope*, R. Banks, ed., (Exeter: Paternoster Press; 1974) 153.

expiation of sin which is spoken of. For many readers, however, the term "expiation" would be even more difficult than "propitiation". In fact, both "expiation" and "propitiation", like "justification" and "predestination", are not much more than anglicised Latin. These words exist in dictionaries, but they are only very rarely heard in speech. Hence, if even the phrase "expiation of sins" is to be understood, it is much better rendered in 1 John 2:2 as "And Christ himself is the means by which our sins are forgiven". With the wording the vital message of this important verse becomes crystal clear.[40]

Had Nida been content to argue that in a common language version or in view of the target audience there is no room for such rare and difficult words, one could perhaps accept his position. But that is not his argument at all. Apart from his strange antipathy to English vocabulary with Latin origins, he finds the whole idea of propitiation repugnant, but rather than opt for the equally difficult 'expiation' he advocates a simplified paraphrase that no longer has any contact with the sacrificial cultus whose categories are being used by the NT writers. That 'the vital message now becomes crystal clear' may be true. But to what extent is it the same message?

It is appropriate at this point to provide a brief survey of the linguistic evidence. The ἱλάσκεσθαι word group has a long history of usage in the LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible so often quoted by the NT writers, and the version with which the first readers of the NT letters would have been most familiar. These terms are chiefly used as equivalents of the *Pi'el* conjugation of the Hebrew verb כפר and its derivatives. The debate among scholars as to whether כפר originally mean 'cover completely' or 'wipe out' is not relevant for our purposes. Its cultic use denotes the restoration of a relationship between God and man which has been broken by sin, normally through the offering of a sacrifice. Thus God is said to have taken the initiative in providing the means of atonement, e.g. Lev 17:11 "I have given it (the sacrificial blood) to you upon the altar to make atonement (Hebrew לכפר LXX ἐξιλάσκεσθαι) for your souls".

That the LXX translators seemed to have regarded ἐξιλάσκομαι and כפר as virtual equivalents is a useful guide to the meaning of the Greek term. However, the Greek text is worthy of investigation in its own right. This is apparent if we look at those verses where the Greek translators used an ἱλάσκεσθαι form even though no כפר word is found in the underlying Hebrew text. Dodd assumed that propitiation was not intended in these cases. However, closer examination indicates that the translators were governed by ideas expressed in the context rather than merely finding equivalents for particular Hebrew words. Thus in 2 Kgs 24:4 the Hebrew clause reads לסלח

---

40 E.A. Nida, 'Translating Means Communication', in *Linguistics and Anthropology* ed. M. Saville-Troike (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1977) 73-4.

ולא־אבה יהוה (The Lord was unwilling to forgive). In the LXX we would expect to find the root סלח translated by a Greek verb such as ἀφίεναι (forgive) or καθαρίζειν (cleanse). Instead the LXX reads οὐκ ἠθέλησεν κύριος ἱλασθῆναι (the Lord refused to be placated). It appears that the Septuagint translator was influenced by the context which concerns God's judgement on Judah for the evil perpetrated by King Manasseh. The same construction is found in Dan 9:19 and Lam 3:43, where again the context of seeking to avoid divine wrath leads to the use of ἱλασθῆναι. Again in Ex 32:14 where the Hebrew says that as a result of Moses' intercession "the Lord repented of the evil that he intended to do to his people", the LXX read καὶ ἱλάσθη, translating the root נחם

Even clearer is the use of ἐξιλάσκεσθαι to translate חלה (mollify) in Zech 7:2 and 8:22 and Mal 1:9. Dodd acknowledged that these are 'unmistakable examples of the ordinary classical and Hellenistic sense of *exilaskesthai* = propitiate',[41] but maintained that because the reference is to non-Israelites they can be allowed little significance. Dodd's argument would carry some weight if the narrative described pagan worship. Instead it is about Gentiles who join the Jewish pilgrims going to Jerusalem.

Another interesting example is found in Ps 106:30, the one occasion where the LXX uses ἐξιλάσκεσθαι to render פלל , a verb which means 'pray' or 'intercede' and which is normally translated προσεύχεσθαι. In this verse the psalmist recalls the incident related in Numbers 25 when Israel 'attached themselves to the Baal of Peor and ate sacrifice offered to the dead they provoked the Lord to anger with their doings and a plague broke out among them. Then Phineas (the priest) stood up and interposed and the plague was stayed' (Ps 106:28-30). As noted above, פלל means no more than intercede, but the Septuagint translator, apparently reflecting on the context, writes down 'Phineas stood up and placated (the Lord)'. The LXX choice of ἐξιλάσκεσθαι was no doubt influenced not only by the general theme of averting God's wrath (Num 25:3-5 records God's command to Moses to 'Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the Lord that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel'), but also by the memory of the end of that narrative where the Lord gave Phineas 'the covenant of a perpetual priesthood because he was jealous for his God and *made atonement for the people* of Israel' (Num 25:13 RSV). The Hebrew translated 'made atonement' is כפר and the LXX translation is ἐξιλάσατο used without an object, just as in Ps 106:30 (cf. Eccl 45:23).

We have seen then in these unexpected appearances of ἱλάσκεσθαι or ἐξιλάσκεσθαι in the LXX (viz. Zech 7:2; 8:22; Mal 1:9; Ps 106:30; Eccl 45:23; 2

---

41 C.H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*, (London Hodder & Stoughton,1935) 355.

Kgs 24:4; Ex 32:14 and 1 Sam 6:3) that the verb seems to be used by the translators with the propitiatory meaning that it bears in non-biblical Greek.

In eighty three out of one hundred and six occurrences in the LXX ἐξιλάσκεσθαι translates the Hebrew root כ פ ר usually in cultic context. The instances in the non-cultic contexts can be rendered 'propitiate'. Some examples are: Prov 16:14: 'The wrath of a king is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it' (LXX, ἐξιλάσεται). In Gen 32:21 Jacob thinks that his present will appease Esau's wrath and the LXX renders the words literally ἐξιλάσομαι τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς δώροις'. Again 2 Sam 21:1-14 describes King David's attempt to get rid of a famine which had been caused by his predecessor's ill treatment of the Gibeonites. David asks them, "What shall I do for you? With what shall I make atonement?" (כ פ ר LXX ἐξιλάσομαι, v.3). It is agreed that the seven sons of Saul be hanged. The passage includes the ideas of propitiating anger and making compensation. In these non-cultic contexts, כ פ ר (and the ἱλάσκομαι form used in the LXX to translate it) regularly bears the meaning to avert punishment by the payment of a כ פ ר (ransom) which may be money or which may be a life.

However, as most occurrences of ἐξιλάσκεσθαι are found as the translation of כ פ ר in cultic contexts where the worshipper expresses his penitence ritually by animal sacrifice, biblical scholars agree that this usage is the most significant for interpreting the terminology of the NT. The ritual of the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippurim*) described in Leviticus 16 is typical:

> Then the priest shall kill the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood within the veil, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy seat (ἱλαστήριον) and before the mercy seat; thus he shall make atonement (ἐξιλάσεται) for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions. (Lev 16:15-16)

Similar cultic usages can be found in Ex 30:10, 15, 16; Lev 1:4; 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 6:6, 10, 12, 16, 18; 7:7, 30, 37; 8:15, 34; 9:7; 10:17; 12:7, 8; 14:18, 19, 20, 21, 29, 31, 53; 15:15, 30; 16:6, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 20, 24, 27, 30, 32, 33, 34; 17:11; 19:22; 23:28; Num 5:8; 6:11; 8:12, 19, 21; 15:25, 28; 16:46, 47; 25:13; 28:22, 30; 29:5, 11; 31:50; 35:33; Deut 21:8; 1 Sam 3:14; 6:3; 1 Chron 6:49; 2 Chron 29:24; 30:19; Neh 10:33; Ps 106:30; Exek 43:20, 22, 26:45:15, 17, 18, 20; Dan 9:24; Zech 7:2. In some contexts the notion of propitiation is particularly strong e.g. Num 16:44-46:

> And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron 'Depart from the midst of this congregation, and I will consume them at once'; and they fell upon their faces. And Moses said to Aaron, 'Take a censor and put on it fire from the altar, and put incense on it, and carry it away quickly into the camp,

and make atonement for them (Hebrew כִּפֶּר LXX (17:11) ἐξίλασαι);
for wrath is gone forth from the presence of the Lord: it has begun to
destroy the people.

However, especially in Leviticus and Ezekiel, it is not obvious whether ideas of propitiation or expiation are foremost. The verb has become a standard technical term which is perhaps best translated 'make atonement'.

Dodd was right to underline the difference between biblical use of ἱλάσκομαι words and the normal Greek association with a capricious and vindictive deity whose arbitrary punishments can only be avoided by appropriate bribes. Both OT and NT alike represent God Himself as taking the initiative in providing the means for restoring the broken relationship between Himself and His people, cf. Lev 17:11, 'I have given it (the sacrificial blood) to you upon the altar to make atonement for you souls', and Rom 3:25, 'Christ, whom God set forth to be a propitiation (ἱλαστήριον) through faith, by his blood'. But clearly, propitiatory connotations have not disappeared. If that had been the intention of the LXX translators or the NT writers after them, it is incredible that they would choose terms which in normal everyday usage were saturated with propitiatory associations. However distasteful to the modern mind, one cannot escape the constant references to the wrath of God in both OT and NT. But the biblical context always makes clear that this is no arbitrary passion of a capricious deity but the stern reaction of a holy God to man's disobedience and evil.

Three other members of the ἱλάσκομαι group must be looked at before we turn to the NT texts. Firstly, ἱλάσκομαι itself (as distinct from the far more common compound verb discussed above) occurs only eleven times in the LXX. The underlying Hebrew is כִּפֶּר three times, סלח six times and נחם once. There is no corresponding Hebrew verb for the occurrence in Est 13:17. Generally these Hebrew verbs convey meanings such as 'forgive' but as we have already seen (e.g. Ex 32:14) the LXX translators felt free to use an ἱλάσκομαι word if the context warranted it. Thus, in six out of these eleven occurrences, there is explicit mention of wrath (e.g. Ex 32:14; Lam 3:42; Dan 9:19). 2 Kgs 5:18 refers to the incident where Naaman the Syrian asks pardon for bowing down in the pagan temple of Rimmon, i.e. the most heinous of sins in a Jewish context—idolatry.

It has been argued that in the case of Ps 64:4 where 'sins' is in the accusative case, the translation should read 'expiate our sins'. This may be correct. But it is interesting that a number of manuscripts read the dative case. This shows that if the original were an accusative it was regarded as so unusual that some scribes felt constrained to modify it to a dative. Certainly both ἱλάσκομαι and ἐξιλάσκομαι are generally used with

an emphasis on relations between persons, a fact which accords better with a meaning such as propitiate than expiate. The most common construction occurring some sixty times, is περί with the genitive of the person (i.e. to make propitiation concerning a person).

The nouns ἱλασμός and ἐξιλάσμος are used interchangeably some sixteen times in the LXX. Forgiveness is the meaning in Dan 9:8 and Ps 129:4. But it is the cultic usage which prevails in such expressions as 'day of atonement', 'blood of atonement', 'house of atonement' (Num 5:8; Lev 23:27, 28; 1 Chron 20:28; 28:11; Ezek 7:25; 43:23; 45:19). As well as translating כפר it is used to translate the Hebrew word for sin offering (e.g. Amos 8:14; Ezek 44:27; 45:19). In some contexts the propitiatory overtones are very strong (e.g. Dan 9:8; 2 Mac 3:33).

Finally, the noun ἱλαστήριον occurs twenty seven times in the LXX. On twenty one occasions it translates the Hebrew כפרת or mercy seat. This golden slab in the Holy of Holies was held to be the special place of God's presence and it was sprinkled with blood on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). ἱλαστήριον also occurs five times in Ezekiel's vision of the postexilic temple (Ezek 43), where it denotes a ledge on the sacrificial altar on which blood was to be painted. There is only one non-cultic use of the word, and that is in the apocryphal 4 Maccabees; a book written about 40 AD,[42] a few years before the NT letters were written. Referring to the martyrdom of the seven brothers, the verse (17:22) reads:

> They having as it were become a ransom (ἀντίψυχον) for the nation's sins; and through the blood for these righteous men and the propitiation of their death (τοῦ ἱλαστηρίου τοῦ θανατοῦ αὐτοῦ), the divine providence delivered Israel which had hitherto suffered evil.

The commentary of 2 Maccabees on the same incident (7:33-38) confirms the propitiatory interpretation of the death of the brothers:

> I, like my brothers, give up body and soul for our fathers' laws, calling on God to show favour to our nation soon...and to let the Almighty's wrath, justly fallen on the whole of our nation, end in me and my brothers.

These passages, by the way, were not treated by Dodd because he regarded the LXX books for which there was no available Hebrew original as unsuitable for his comparative methods. His aim was to demonstrate how the Hebrew forced Greek words into a new mould. However, once again, Dodd's methodology can be criticised. The whole range of LXX usage is relevant to the investigation, particularly

---

42 D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings. Studies in Semantics of Soteriological Terms*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1967) 43.

as Dodd was arguing that the usage of the NT authors was determined by the usage of the LXX.

Because Dodd's investigation has proved the point of departure for modern study of the ἱλάσκεσθαι terminology[43] it would be as well to review his methodology before summarizing the conclusions of this discussion of LXX usage. Dodd sought to establish the meaning of ἐξιλάσκομαι and cognates by a threefold method of approach.[44] Firstly, he looked at other Greek terms which translate the Hebrew כפר Secondly, he examined Hebrew verbs other than כפר that are occasionally rendered by ἐξιλάσκομαι. Finally, he looked at ἐξιλάσκομαι as the normal LXX translation of כפר The first approach revealed that כפר is sometimes translated by such variants as ἁγιάζω and καθαρίζω, verbs meaning 'sanctify', 'purify' (persons or ritual objects)—and others, such as 'forgive', 'wipe away'. He then draws the illegitimate conclusion that the LXX translators must have regarded the more common ἱλάσκεσθαι class as conveying similar ideas. Dodd's second line of investigation is threatened by four texts which we have discussed above (namely: Zech 7:2; 8:22; Mal 1:9 and Ps 196:30.), but he concludes that with the exception of these four texts the ἱλάσκομαι group, when translating Hebrew roots other than כפר means 'to cleanse from sin', 'to have mercy' or 'to forgive' with a divine subject. We have suggested above, however, that the LXX translators' unexpected use of ἱλάσκεσθαι (rather than, e.g., καθαρίζω or ἀφίεναι) does not necessarily indicate a modification of its meaning but rather shows they were more influenced by the context with its references to God's wrath than by merely substituting word for word equivalents. Dodd's third approach concludes that where ἐξιλάσκομαι translates כפר as a religious term, it does not have the sense of propitiating the deity but of performing an act whereby guilt or defilement is removed. He gives little weight to the non-cultic occurrences of כפר as he regarded them as being of no consequence for the cultic texts. He has come under fire for this from Hill, who maintains the former are important for discovering the basic meaning of the word.[45] However, Hill, who seems to claim more than Morris did for the significance of non-cultic usage, is on dangerous ground. After all, neither the language of the Hebrew Bible nor the LXX is entirely homogeneous. In defining the meaning of words or phrases one must allow for the possibility of variation according to the style and register being used. By 'register' we mean the variety of language appropriate to a particular social situation.[46] Hence it is theoretically quite possible that ἐξιλάσκομαι conveys strong ideas of

---

43 N. Young, 'C.H. Dodd, "Hilaskesthai' and His Critics', *EQ* 48:2 (1976) 76.

44 C.H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935) 82f.

45 D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings. Studies in Semantics of Soteriological Terms*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1967) 31.

46 Cf. J.C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965) 85; J.F.A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research*, (London: SCM, 1972) 17.

appeasement in non-cultic contexts which recede or disappear in its cultic occurrences. From his three lines of enquiry, Dodd concludes:

> Hellenistic Judaism, as represented by the LXX, does not regard the cultus as a means of pacifying the displeasure of the Deity, but as a means of delivering man from sin, and it looks in the last resort to God himself to perform that deliverance, thus evolving a meaning of *hilaskesthai* strange to non-biblical Greek.[47]

He then applies to the NT occurrences the finding of his LXX enquiry, arguing that the rendering 'propitiation' is illegitimate in the NT.

The above discussion has sought to draw attention to some weaknesses in Dodd's methodology, which impair his study. His arguments, drawn from the translation variants (his first two lines of approach) are not legitimate (he is unable to show that they are synonyms). His lexicographical method regularly ignores the context, and so neglects the element of wrath so frequently present.[48]

Hilaskesthai Words in the NT and the Implications for Bible Translation

We can now turn to the six occurrences of ἱλάσκεσθαι words in the NT and their translation.

1) The first, Heb 2:17, is explicitly cultic. It is said that Jesus had to become truly human so that he might become "a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God (εἰς τὸ ἱλάσκεσθαι) for the sins of the people". Noting that the verb is followed by 'sins' in the accusative case, Bruce comments that:

> the renderings of RSV ("to make expiation for") and NEB ("to expiate") might be justified here because the direct object of the verb is sins (*hamartias*). But if sins require to be expiated, it is because they are committed against someone who ought to be propitiated.[49]

Morris, however, defends the traditional rendering "to make propitiation with regard to the sins of the people", treating it as an accusative of respect. He points out that: (i) although there is no reference to wrath, yet the mention of Jesus as a "merciful high priest" presumes the classical usage, (ii) the phrase "things pertaining to God" (τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν) focuses on the Godward aspect of the atonement, (iii) the few occurrences of 'sin' in the accusative form after the verb seem to imply propitiation,

---

[47] C.H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935) 89.

[48] L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, (London: Tyndale Press, 1955) 129-36

[49] F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (NICNT) (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1964) 41 (footnote 57). In the revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) page 78 (footnote 57), Bruce repeat this statement essentially but adds that 'in the Greek Bible ἱλάσκομαι is not found with the person propitiated as its object', cf. P. Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 188.

and (iv) the variant reading (ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις) found in some early manuscripts arose in circles where the peculiarity of the accusative after ἱλάσκομαι was felt.

Rather than press for an interpretation solely in terms of propitiation, perhaps we could be satisfied with the translation of the NIV 'that he might make atonement for the sins of the people', cf. the Jerusalem Bible's 'able to atone for human sins'. Such translations make clear that the work of Christ is being explained in terms of OT sacrificial categories, something which is not at all obvious from the GNB's 'so that people's sins would be forgiven'.

2. This verb ἱλάσκομαι is only found again in the words of the penitent publican in Luke 18:13, ὁ θεός, ἱλάσθητί μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ, usually translated, 'God be merciful to me a sinner'. The ASV margin has 'Be thou propitiated', but although it could be argued that God's holy reaction to sin is implied, there is no reference to divine wrath and 'be propitiated' or 'be propitious' seems a bit forced. Accordingly, seven of our eight translations represent the words simply as a plea for God's mercy. The GNB substitutes 'pity' for 'mercy' (viz. 'God have pity on me a sinner'). This is not an improvement, as it takes us more into the realm of feelings and emotion rather than attitude.

3. Next we come to the noun ἱλαστήριον in Heb 9:5 and Rom 3:25. The first is a clear-cut reference to the 'mercy seat' which one meets so often in the LXX. The writer to the Hebrews is describing the furnishings and sacrificial arrangements in the sanctuary under the old covenant before going on to demonstrate the superiority of the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ. Above the ark of the covenant, he reminds his readers, were 'the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat (ἱλαστήριον), of which things we cannot now speak in detail'. Again Bruce's commentary on τὸ ἱλαστήριον is helpful.

> The lid of the ark was a golden slab called the "mercy seat" or place of atonement, viewed by our author as the earthly counterpart of the "throne of grace" to which he has already exhorted his readers to draw near for help in the hour of need (4:16). It was given this name because of the part it played in the sacrificial ritual of the Day of Atonement; the blood both of the bullock which was offered to make atonement for the high priest and his family, and of the goat which was killed as a sin offering for the whole nation, was sprinkled on the mercy seat and in front of it, while the God of Israel undertook to "appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat" (Lev. 16:2; cf. vv.14f.). The "cherubim of glory" were two gold figures of composite creatures which overshadowed the mercy seat (Ex. 25:18-22; 37:7-9) and served to support the invisible presence of Israel's God, who accordingly is repeatedly described as the one "who is enthroned on the cherubim" (1 Sam. 4:4, etc.). It was because of this function that they

were called "cherubim of glory"; the glory is the *shekhînah,* the radiant presence of God dwelling in the midst of his people.[50]

There has never been any doubt, then, what is denoted by τὸ ἱλαστήριον in Heb 9:5. The KJV, RV, RSV and JBP rendered it 'mercy seat'. The NEB's 'place of expiation' and NIV's 'place of atonement' have the virtue of retaining the concordance of the ST. We would recommend 'place of propitiation' or 'place of atonement' in line with the above exposition of LXX usage. The GNB, alone of all our translations, fails to preserve the reference to OT ritual of sacrifice with its generalised rendering 'the place where sins were forgiven'. Incidentally, the use of the past tense 'were forgiven' seems to imply that at the time the Epistle was penned, this ritual was no longer observed. There is, of course, no verb in the original, but the substitution is typical. In the following paragraph, namely Heb 9:6-9, the writer describes the priestly ritual as it is still going on and the GNB faithfully reproduces the present tenses of the Greek verbs without apparently sensing any inconsistency with the 'were forgiven' above: 'The priests go into the outer Tent every day to perform their duties, but only the High Priest goes into the Inner Tent, and he does so only once a year. He takes with him blood which he offers to God...'

4. The use of ἱλαστήριον in Rom 3:25 falls in what is generally agreed to be one of the key sections of Paul's Epistle (Rom 3:1-26). The immediate context states 'For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward (ἱλαστήριον) by blood, to be received by faith'. Dodd's view, so influential for the RSV and NEB, was as follows:

> Here it is unnecessary for our present purpose to decide whether *hilasterion* is an adjective in the accusative singular masculine or a neuter substantive. In any case the meaning conveyed (in accordance with LXX usage, which is constantly determinative for Paul) is that of expiation, not propitiation.[51]

That the usage of ἱλαστήριον in Biblical Greek is the best guide to Paul's meaning is not in dispute. But the preceding discussion has shown that ideas of propitiation are unmistakably present in LXX usage. Furthermore when we study the context of Rom 3:25 we find it is dominated by themes of judgement and wrath. For 'when we consider the general argument of the Epistle to this point, we find that the opening chapters have a single dominating purpose, namely, to demonstrate that all men lie

---

[50] F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews,* revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 204. Originally published in 1964 in London by Marshall, Morgan & Scott.

[51] C.H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks,* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935) 95.

under the condemnation and wrath of God'.[52] The argument begins (1:18) with the announcement 'for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth'. The following verses emphasise that this is not some impersonal, automatic moral law at work, as Dodd seeks to argue in his commentary on Romans[53] but the personal reaction of a Holy God. Thus 'God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts' (1:24); 'God gave them up to vile passions' (1:26); 'God gave them up to a reprobate mind' (1:28). Having described God's wrath on the pagan world in Chapter 1, Paul then rounds on the censorious Jews in Chapter 2 and shows that they are likewise under God's wrath. He clinches his cases with a bracket of OT quotations in Chapter 3 so that 'every mouth might be sealed and all the world brought to trial before God' (3:19-20).

It is this background of universal culpability and condemnation, then, that precedes Paul's announcement of a new factor whereby, quite independently of law, a righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness leading to the sinner's justification through Christ 'whom God set forth through faith, by his blood (ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεός ἱλαστήριον διὰ πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι)'. Commentators agree that ἱλαστήριον goes with 'by (or in) his blood' and not with 'through faith', despite the word order.[54] In other words, Christ became ἱλαστήριον by means of the shedding of his blood. The context of Rom 3:25, then, is so full of the idea of God's wrath that it is not unnatural to expect some expression which indicates its cancellation. This was certainly the interpretation of the older commentaries. Thus Sanday and Headlam's classic *International Critical Commentary* notes:

> It is impossible to get rid from this passage of the double idea (1) of sacrifice; (2) of a sacrifice which is propitiatory...And further, when we ask, Who is propitiated? The answer can only be 'God'. Nor is it possible to separate this propitiation from the Death of the Son. Quite apart from this passage, it is not difficult to prove that these two ideas of sacrifice and propitiation lie at the root of the teaching not only of St Paul but of the New Testament generally.[55]

Much new linguistic, textual, historical and archaeological evidence has become available for biblical studies since the ICC series of commentaries was conceived almost a century ago. The subsequent two volume ICC commentary on Romans by C.E.B. Cranfield, has a lengthy treatment of ἱλαστήριον in which he reviews

[52] D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings. Studies in Semantics of Soteriological Terms*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1967) 39.

[53] C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932) 49f.

[54] C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1959) 79; L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, (London: Tyndale Press, 1955) 79; C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans*, Vol.1 (ICC) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1975) 210.

[55] W. Sanday and A.C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 5th ed. (ICC), (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, reprinted 1975, 1902) 91.

previous scholarly discussion. As the word is used in twenty one out of its twenty seven LXX occurrences to translate the כפרת or mercy seat (cf. Heb 9:5 above) he considers the possibility that Paul is using it here in that sense too, portraying Christ as the anti-type of the OT mercy seat. He recalls that his interpretation has the support of a long exegetical tradition and finds it attractive. However, he concedes that Morris has undermined this interpretation by pointing out that wherever in the LXX ἱλαστήριον means mercy seat, it is used with the definite article. Nor is there anything in the context which can be said to indicate unambiguously that the mercy seat is referred to. In evaluating Dodd's study, Cranfield supports Morris' criticism that Dodd neglected the contexts of ἱλαστήριον terminology, and he agrees that the averting of wrath is basic to the OT usage as it is to extra-biblical Greek. With regard to the interpretation of ἱλαστήριον in Rom 3:25, he reduces the options to four:

    (i)   propitiatory or propitiating
    (ii)   a propitiator
    (iii)   a propitiation
    (iv)   a propitiatory sacrifice

In view of the additional phrase ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι (in his blood) he finally recommends the fourth. Paul is saying 'that God purposed Christ as a propitiatory victim'.[56]

At this point it might be appropriate to comment on the translation of αἷμα. Despite Nida's acknowledgement that 'blood' should be retained in the NT passages "where there is a clear reference to blood as a symbolic element in the sacrifice of Jesus",[57] the GNB translates ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι in Rom 3:25 with "by his death". Since ἱλαστήριον is again translated by the general phrase 'the means by which people's sins are forgiven', the reader is deprived completely of the two clues which tell him that the death of Jesus is being explained by Paul in terms of OT sacrificial categories. In fact, the GNB's systematic removal of references to Jesus' blood is difficult to understand. Nida defends it by pointing to a number of passages where it is retained (e.g. John 6:53-56; Heb 9:14; 10:29; 1 John 1:7 and the reference to the Lord's supper, viz. Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 10:16; 11:25, 27) and by adding that:

> It would be a serious mistake, however, to assume that wherever the Greek term *haima* occurs, it should always be translated "blood" since in many instances it has quite a different meaning. In Matthew 27:24-25, Pilate washes his hands and says to the crowd, "I am innocent of the

---

56   C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans*, Vol.1 (ICC) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1975) 217 cf D. Moo, *Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991) 231-37..

57   E.A. Nida, 'Translating Means Communication,' in *Linguistics and Anthropology* ed. M. Saville-Troike (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1977) 75.

haima of this man". Quite clearly Pilate is referring to Jesus' forthcoming execution, and when the crowd shouts back, "May his *haima* be upon us and our children" the reference is to their demand for Jesus' death. For this reason the Good News Bible renders Pilate's statement as "I am not responsible for the death of this man" and the crowd's response as "Let the punishment for his death fall on us and our children".[58]

It is not easy to follow Nida's reasoning here. Admittedly there is no allusion to sacrificial ritual. But 'blood' in English as well as Greek, may be used metaphorically as well as literally. To claim that $\alpha\hat{\iota}\mu\alpha$ does not mean 'blood' in an expression like "I am innocent of the $\alpha\hat{\iota}\mu\alpha$ of this man" is to take an extraordinarily wooden attitude to language. One wonders why Pilate bothered to take water and symbolically wash his hands before the crowd. The GNB's renderings are a needless impoverishment. 'Blood' remains in the English language as a particularly vivid metonymy for death.

5. Finally, we turn to the noun $\iota\lambda\alpha\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ which in the NT occurs only in 1 John at 2:2 and 4:10. As the context provides little new evidence, we assume the term bears its normal meaning 'propitiation'. Nothing in the context of the eight LXX occurrences gives us reason to interpret it otherwise.

The first passage, 1 John 2:2, says "If any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is ($\iota\lambda\alpha\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$) for our sins". The second in 1 John 4:10, 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His son to be the $\iota\lambda\alpha\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ for our sins'. There is no explicit mention of God's wrath in the three brief Johannine Epistles, but in his Gospel, John does state that 'the wrath of God abides' on the disobedient unbeliever (3:36 cf 5:29), so the concept is clearly not foreign to the 'apostle of love', as he is known. Moreover, the fact that Jesus Christ the righteous is the advocate in heaven could be seen to imply divine hostility. John Stott, commenting on these verses, succinctly captures the uniqueness of biblical propitiation—'It is an appeasement of the wrath of God by the love of God through the gift of God'.[59]

Once again we must underline the inadequacy of the GNB translation of $\iota\lambda\alpha\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ as 'the means by which our sins are forgiven' (though the NEB's 'remedy for the defilement of our sins' is no better).

There are two major issues involved here. The first is whether $\iota\lambda\acute{\alpha}\sigma\kappa\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$ and its cognates are to be understood in terms of 'propitiation' or 'expiation'. We have

---

58 E.A. Nida and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, (Helps for Translators, No.8; Leiden: Brill, 1969) 76.

59 J.R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 2nd ed., (Leicester: InterVarsity Press and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 88.

provided, briefly, reason to doubt Dodd's case for the latter understanding of the words. There is no doubt that, although still strange to the modern Western mind, the language of 'expiation' is less repugnant than that of 'propitiation'. (This is *not* a comment on the reasons for using 'expiation', but on the results of doing so.) A translation which gives priority to the receptor will obviously find it hard to retain such language.

But 'expiation' still leaves us firmly within the domain of Israel's cultus, and so makes clear to the modern reader that the NT explains the death of Christ in terms of OT sacrificial ritual. It is surely a major defect of the DE translations we have considered that they sever this connection, and thus give their readers no opportunity to see *how*, in Biblical terms, God in Christ deals with sin.

D. CONCLUSION

The writers of the NT utilised terminology which lay at hand in the Greek Septuagint. In many cases this terminology had acquired a slightly different and more restricted sense than in secular usage, either because of its use as translation equivalents for Hebrew religious vocabulary or because of the new context in which it was embedded. Biblical commentators are unanimous that this terminology is highly significant because it anchors the gospel of Jesus firmly in the religious traditions and eschatological hope of Israel. However, Nida's DE theory, and its exemplification in the GNB, takes no account of the significance of this technical terminology, replacing it with simplified paraphrases which, though more intelligible to the modern reader, deprive him of access to the 'universe of discourse' of the NT writers.

This study focused on a particular group of cultic words associated with the sacrificial system, which was not only central in the religious history of Israel but had been part of the social experience of many NT writers. The study was carried out along quite conventional lines. No attempt was made to experiment with more recent methods such as the semantic field approach or the meaning-relations approach of structural semantics.[60] However, the investigation has sought to avoid the kind of pitfalls pointed out by Barr and has given full value to context and synchronic description. Certainly in the field of biblical studies semanticists have a distinct advantage over their colleagues in other areas of linguistic research in so far as they have a closed literary corpus to deal with.

---

[60] cf. J.F.A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research*, (London: SCM, 1972); J. Lyons, *Semantics*, Vol 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977)

The particular terminology selected was the ἱλάσκεσθαι group of words, which in both classical and Koine Greek refers to the placating or appeasing of the wrath of a person—usually associated with a vengeful and capricious god. Much consideration has been given to the view of C.H. Dodd that in the LXX usage, influenced by the underlying Hebrew text, practically no vestige of the propitiatory sense remains and that rather, these terms come to refer to an impersonal expiation or cancellation of sin— at least in cultic contexts. This, according to Dodd, was the usage inherited by the NT writers. His views have been very influential in English Bible translation since 1935.

Our own study has confirmed that the underlying Hebrew text generally provides a good guide to the interpretation of the Greek version. However, not all the LXX translators seem to have regarded their task as one of mechanically inserting equivalents. Ideas expressed in the context, rather than the presence of a particular Hebrew term, often influenced their translation into Greek. Dodd's neglect of this factor has been rightly criticised by Morris and Hill.[61] Dodd was, however, correct to recognise that the language of the LXX, like its Hebrew *Vorlage*, is not entirely homogenous and he was right to allow for the possibility that usage of ἱλάσκεσθαι words in the cultic religious register might not be the same as that in the conventional language (where he acknowledged that propitiatory ideas prevailed).

In the LXX there are some one hundred and sixty occurrences of ἱλάσκεσθαι words normally as translation equivalents for the כפר word group in the Hebrew Bible. Occasionally ἱλάσκεσθαι words are used unexpectedly to translate other Hebrew verbs meaning 'forgive' or 'cleanse'. But closer inspection of the context reveals references to divine wrath and its avoidance which apparently influenced the translator to opt for a propitiation word. Most occurrences of ἱλάσκεσθαι words are in the context of the sacrificial cult. Here the words acquire the technical sense 'to make atonement' (i.e. between God and man by the offering of an appropriate gift). However, there is no evidence that propitiatory connotations have disappeared. In urging the use of 'expiation' rather than 'propitiation', Dodd, like Nida, was influenced more by theodicy than linguistic evidence. That is not to say that there are no modifications of the associations of these terms compared with their extra-biblical sense. The context of the Scriptures made it clear that the God of Israel is perfectly righteous and free from arbitrariness and caprice in His actions. Moreover, He Himself graciously provides what is necessary for the averting of His righteous wrath from man. It is this cultic usage that is inherited by the NT writers.

---

61 L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, (London: Tyndale Press, 1955); D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings. Studies in Semantics of Soteriological Terms*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1967).

When we turn to the six occurrences of ἱλάσκεσθαι words in the NT (Heb 2:17; Luke 18:13; Heb 9:5; Rom 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10) it is clear that the technical usage of LXX is determinative in each case except one (Luke 18:13). In other words the ST confronts the translator with a concatenation of ideas which, however foreign or repugnant to the modern mind, are vital to an understanding of the writer's message—sacrifice, blood, propitiation, cleansing, forgiveness—ideas rooted directly in the sacrificial system of the OT law.

The propitiation-expiation debate, then, is of minor significance compared with the importance of recognising that this is technical language drawn from the sacrificial cultus. The use of these ἱλάσκεσθαι words in the Bible reflects a real concordance in the ST. This has in fact, been recognised and reproduced in the standard translations. The GNB, however, by dropping the cultic terminology in favour of a general paraphrase more intelligible to the modern reader, obliterates the concordance of the ST and deprives him of the clues that he needs to understand the NT writer.