

# The CROSS

by Brad Jersak

## God's Eternal Mercy Seat

The celebration of Easter this month once again places the Cross of Christ and his resurrection front and center of our faith, as they should be. These events comprise a hinge-point in the human story and what theologians have called “salvation history.” The New Testament witness not only records what occurred but also reflects upon the meaning of those occurrences as good news—our *gospel*.

Unveiling the meaning of the crucifixion is of particular importance to the apostles, because they are convinced that it spelled more than a tragic end to the life of Jesus. Somehow, the Cross is essential groundwork for the reconciliation of all people and the restoration of all things. To make their case, the first Christians developed a constellation of words, images, and analogies—leaning heavily on how their Jewish backstory anticipated a Messiah who suffers and dies before entering his glory.

*Jesus is the “hilasterion” for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2).*

One such word-picture comes from the Greek term *hilasterion*. John the beloved disciple writes that Jesus “is the *hilasterion* for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). In Romans 3:25, Paul speaks of Jesus, “whom God put forward as a *hilasterion* by his blood.” The big question is what *hilasterion* means and how best to translate it.

Some Bibles render the word *propitiation*, others *expiation*, and still others *atoning sacrifice*. Such terms tend to be obscure or worse—they seem to suggest an *appeasing* sacrifice toward a wrathful God. So our readers are right to ask, “What do you make of this in light of a *nonviolent* God?”

What an important question! Especially when readers are so often at the mercy of the theology of translators. That’s why it’s good to compare Bible translations and check in with those who have more time to dig a little deeper.

We need to carefully assess a specifically gospel approach to translating *hilasterion*. Pagan religions in Jesus’ day could use that term to describe:

**a. propitiation:** offering sacrifices to their gods to avert their wrath and gain their favor, in which case, the gods were reconciled to them, or...

**b. expiation:** their gods could remove whatever offense was alienating the people, so that the people were reconciled to the gods.

In the 20th century, Christian theologians argued these senses of *hilasterion* from either side. Most famously, C.H. Dodd argued that God *expiated* (removed, washed away) our sin (by forgiveness) to reconcile us to himself. Meanwhile, Leon Morris

argued that Jesus was the sacrifice of *propitiation* that appeased God’s wrath so God could be reconciled to us (hence the phrase “penal substitutionary atonement”).

But here’s the thing: to begin with, we’re NOT pagans. For us, the

backstory for the Christian use of *hilasterion* is NOT pagan sacrificial religion. The word was also used frequently by God’s people in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), which was composed before the time of Christ and cited in the New Testament.

### THE MERCY SEAT

In the Septuagint, *hilasterion* primarily refers to *the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant*. This is the throne where God would sit as Israel’s king ... a throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16) where God extends the mercy that endures forever.

*Hilasterion* can thus be defined as “the means or the place where sins are forgiven and reconciliation happens.” In the NT, where is the mercy seat where we see God seated? **The *hilasterion* is the throne of grace, the seat of mercy, which is the Cross of Christ!**

And rather than demanding a blood sacrifice to appease God’s wrath for our sins (propitiation), we see God in Christ offering himself to us as a mercy gift of reconciliation and welcoming us to receive his forgiveness, freely offered. It is by grace that we are saved, not through violent transactional religion. We believe this was the sense in which the apostles John and Paul used the term.

And it’s not just that God forgave our sins, as if sin were merely ‘wrongdoing.’ The sin problem runs far deeper than that. In an *Ancient Faith* blogpost titled “The Seat of Mercy and the End of the Legal View’ (Aug. 11,

2016), Stephen Freeman writes,

*[Sin is] a violation of the very constitution of our being and of the world around us. . . . it is “disintegration.” St. Athanasius and a number of other fathers described it as a movement towards non-being. Sin is substantial. It can be healed and washed, excised and destroyed.*

*This brings us back to the Mercy Seat. Christ is indeed the “Mercy Seat” for our sins. As our Mercy Seat, he destroys them, cleanses*

***“Hilasterion” refers back to the mercy seat of Israel’s ark of the covenant, the throne where God sits as king. The CROSS is that throne of eternal grace and infinite mercy!***

*them, remits them, carries them away, etc. Christ’s bearing of our sin is the bearing of our disintegration, our drive towards non-being. It is the recreation of his creation.*

Now, the NIV translation tried to play it neutral between

propitiation and expiation, by translating *hilasterion* as the “atoning sacrifice,” but again, what do we mean by *atonement*?

The English term was originally coined from *at-one-ment*, which simply means union or reunion, a reconciliation, as with the father and son in the parable of the prodigal sons(s). Yet the English language morphed the word *atonement* through the centuries into almost its opposite: *appeasement*. Then we’ve reverted

to transactional pagan religion!

Instead, we should think of *atonement* as the *reconciliation* we experience through Christ when he forgave humanity from his Mercy Seat—from the Cross.



## RECONCILIATION TOTEM

There is, however, another point of view: a friend alerted me to current research by a scholar at Kings College in Canada (Dr. Andrew Rillera). His PhD research (at Duke University) offers a compelling rationale to argue that *hilasterion* in Romans 3 may *not* be referring to the Mercy Seat. Rather, he argues, Paul may have been referring to *hilasterion* in its common hellenistic (i.e., Greek culture) usage as an *imperial peace totem*. Rillera's claim leans on the archeological discovery of several Roman *hilasterions*.

Hellenistic language for this kind of *hilasterion*, rather than the Jewish Mercy Seat.

It is striking that once again, even the imperial totem represents an act of forgiveness that reconciles without any reference to appeasing the wrath of an angry emperor. It's a sign of forgiveness offered by the king as a visible reminder of grace—no punishment required!

While I am not entirely convinced, it occurs to me that Paul and John may be drawing from *both* Jewish religion and Roman culture to make the same point for both audiences. Could it

sacrifice? Do we imagine sacrifices as offerings of appeasement like that of the pagan religions?

No, for Christians, we think of sacrifice as a facet of *self-giving love*. It is more like the sacrificial love of a mother when giving birth to a child, or the self-sacrifice of a first responder rushing into a burning building to save someone trapped in the flames. Surely these latter illustrations are descriptive of God's sacrifice for us.

P.S. Though I still prefer to use the LXX "mercy seat" and link it to the Cross, I also found the translation "*reconciliation gift*"

helpful in conveying the meaning of *hilasterion's* mercy seat metaphor.

Unfortunately, a lot of the online information is still loaded with the penal substitution propaganda (and promoted as the gospel itself). This really imposes its transactional system onto the word, which becomes self-fulfilling of the theology. In other

## RECONCILIATION TOTEM

The Haida indigenous people erected a reconciliation totem in Vancouver to pay tribute to child survivors of Canada's religion-based residential schools and to remember the thousands of children who died there. The totem features children of diverse tribes standing atop a model of a school. Families of lost children pounded hundreds of copper nails into the image of the school. This cross-shaped totem represents their first steps on the path of truth and reconciliation.

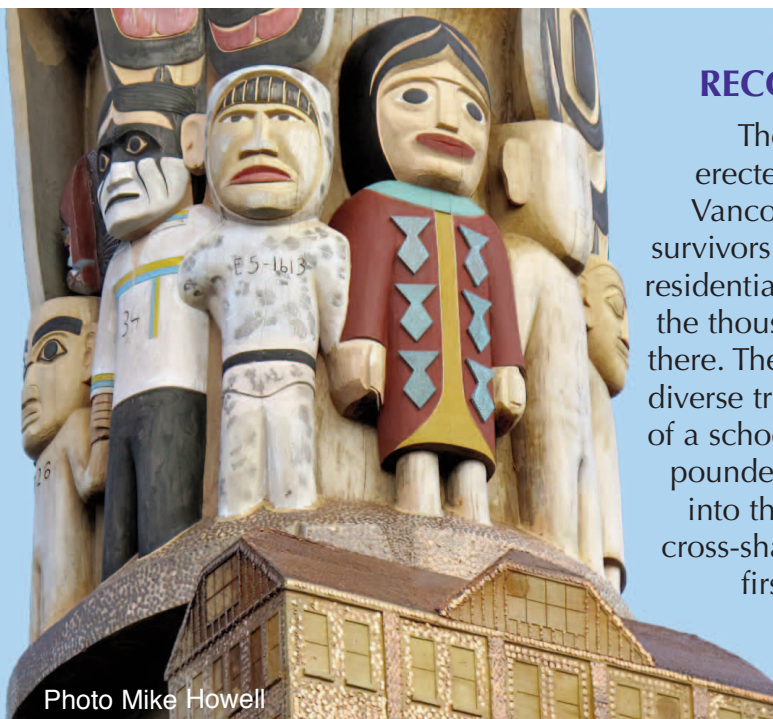


Photo Mike Howell

One example comes from Miletus (in Turkey, just south of Ephesus), where Caesar Augustus forgave the followers of Antony for their rebellion, and erected a stone pillar (*hilasterion*) as a sign of his peace with them. Dr. Rillera makes the case that Jesus is this kind of *hilasterion* in Romans 3. He feels that all the surrounding verses in the text align with

be that the Cross of Christ is the eternal *hilasterion*, forever reminding us of God's mercy, love and peace?

## AT-ONE-ING SACRIFICE

And finally, if we're to make use of the NIV sense of *hilasterion* as *atonement sacrifice*, since the blood of the lamb is sprinkled on the Mercy Seat, what do we mean by

words, they think the *hilasterion* means wrath-appeasement because they *need* it to mean this. Happily, we're now seeing a better and much more beautiful way forward as we explore the glory of the Cross of Christ. □

*Brad Jersak further develops this theology of the Cross in his book, A More Christlike God, available at [www.ptm.org/books](http://www.ptm.org/books).*