

Atonement in the NT

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The words “atone” and “atonement” are common in the English OT, describing Israel’s animal sacrifices. The AV uses “atonement” in the OT 81 times; the NIV both words a total of 111 times, the NASB 93 times, to cite only a few versions.

This vocabulary has been carried over into Christian theology and hymns to describe the death of Christ as an “atonement” for sin, or “atoning” for sin. It is remarkable that the NT writers themselves never use these terms to refer to the death of Christ. Occurrences of the English words in some translations, such as the AV in Rom 5:11 or the NIV in Rom 3:25 and Heb 2:17, are erroneous translations, as we shall see. If we wish to “hold fast the form of sound words” (2 Tim 1:13), we should reconsider whether it is appropriate to use these terms with reference to Christ.

This paper develops this argument in two steps. First, it explains what it means to assert that a (Hebrew) word in the OT does or does not appear in the (Greek) NT, and sets forth the linguistic facts concerning the OT and NT vocabulary, establishing the fact that the NT does not describe the death of Christ as an atonement. Second, it discusses possible reasons for this omission.

The Linguistic Facts

Method

The key tool to matching concepts in the OT with those in the NT is the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew OT made about 200 years before the birth of Christ. (The name “Septuagint” means “the Seventy,” and comes from a tradition that it was prepared by seventy scholars. It is commonly referred to by the Roman numerals for seventy, LXX.) This translation served the early Christians as the English Bible does modern ones. Many of them spoke Greek as well as, or better than, Hebrew, and they drew their Greek theological vocabulary from it. Thus when we ask whether the NT mentions a given OT word, we are really asking whether the NT uses the Greek word that the LXX used to translate the OT word in question.

Like most translations, the LXX does not maintain a strict one-to-one correspondence between Hebrew and Greek words. That is, it does not use only a single Greek word for each Hebrew word, and does not reserve a different Greek word for each Hebrew word. To determine whether users of a Greek word have a particular Hebrew word in mind, we must ask two questions.

1. How many¹ of the occurrences of the Hebrew word are translated by this Greek word, compared with other Greek words? For a Greek word to become associated

¹ Getting accurate counts of textual phenomena is challenging, subject to differences in underlying textual bases, interpretation of translations, and the fact that people can’t count very high reliably. My counts are derived from Hatch-Redpath with the dos Santos index, and from BibleWorks. We are looking for general tendencies, which will be apparent in spite of inevitable errors in precise counts.

with a Hebrew word, it should be the *dominant* Greek translation of that Hebrew word. If some other Greek word is more commonly used, we would expect Greek writers to use that other word in referring to the Hebrew word in question.

2. How many of the occurrences of the Greek word are used for that Hebrew word, compared with other Hebrew words? For a Greek word to be associated with a Hebrew word, it should be *devoted* to that Hebrew word. If it represents one Hebrew word more often than another, its use in Greek probably reflects the first rather than the second word. If it translates many Hebrew words without focusing on one, it is unlikely to become associated with any single word.

When a Greek word is both *dominant* and *devoted* with respect to a Hebrew word in the LXX, it is reasonable to assume that Jewish users of that Greek word in the first century would have had LXX passages involving the Hebrew word in mind. The less dominant and devoted the Greek term is, the less reliably we can conclude that the Greek writer is thinking of these biblical passages.

Hebrew Vocabulary for Atonement

Four terms dominate the Hebrew vocabulary for atonement: the verb *kipper* and nouns derived from it.

1. *kipper* is the verb, overwhelmingly translated in the AV as “make atonement.” It is used almost always to describe Israel’s animal sacrifices.
2. The noun *kofer*² is usually translated “ransom,” and is often used in non-sacrificial contexts.
3. The noun *kippurim* is always translated “atonement,” and is used to describe either a particular sacrifice or the day of atonement.
4. The noun *kapporet* describes the cover on the ark of the covenant, and is always translated “mercy seat.”

Greek Translations of the Hebrew Words

Now let’s consider the Greek translations of each of these terms.

Kipper occurs 92 times. 75 of these instances are translated with the Greek word *exilaskomai*. The other 17 instances are translated by one or another of nearly twenty different words, each used at most 3 times. So *exilaskomai* is clearly the dominant translation of *kipper*. It is also devoted. It occurs 95 times in all, which means that only 20 times is it not a translation of *kipper*, and these 20 instances are scattered across several other Hebrew terms, none of which corresponds to *exilaskomai* more than four times. We are on firm ground in asserting that a Greek speaker who wants to talk about the action of atonement would use *exilaskomai*, and that an occurrence of this Greek verb in a document related to the Old Testament is a reference to the Hebrew verb *kipper*.

² *F* and *p* represent the same letter in Hebrew. When the letter is doubled or comes at the beginning of a word, it is pronounced like English “p,” and otherwise is pronounced like “f.” Distinguishing the two in transliterations enables the reader to pronounce the word correctly.

Kofer is much less common, occurring only 19 times in the OT. Its most common translation is Greek *lutron*, but this translation occurs only six times. The other 13 instances of *kofer* are translated by a variety of Greek words used once or twice each. *Lutron* thus translates fewer than a third of the instances of *kofer*, and can hardly be considered dominant. *Lutron* itself appears a total of 20 times in the LXX. Its single most common Hebrew correspondent is *kofer*, but its other 14 uses translate other Hebrew words, so it is not devoted to *kofer*. Most of these words come from the roots *pdh* and *g'l*, which are commonly translated “redeem.” Thus there is no clear Greek counterpart for the Hebrew *kofer*.

Kippurim appears 8 times, four as *exilasmos* (the noun corresponding to the Greek verb that translates *kipper*), and four as other words. *Exilasmos* occurs a total of seven times. Thus the prevalence and devotion of *exilasmos* for *kippurim* is stronger than that of *lutron* for *kofer*, but not as strong as that of *exilaskomai* for *kipper*. Can we draw conclusions from the use of *exilasmos* about whether the writer has *kippurim* in mind? Based on these counts alone, such an argument would be weak, but given the similarity of *kipper* with *kippurim* and of *exilasmos* with *exilaskomai*, and the frequent use of both in the OT, we probably justified in assuming some linkage between the nouns in a writer’s mind.

Kapporet appears 27 times. 20 times it is translated by *hilast8rion*³, once by *exilasmos*, and the other six times it is translated differently. *Hilast8rion* in turn never translates any other Hebrew word than *kapporet*. Thus it has high prevalence and high devotion, and we can assume that a writer who uses *hilast8rion* has the mercy seat in mind.

In sum, the only Greek words that can be clearly linked via the LXX to the Hebrew vocabulary for “atonement” are *hilast8rion*, *exilaskomai*, and to a lesser degree *exilasmos*.

New Testament Usage

Now we turn to the New Testament and ask how each of these terms is used. Strikingly, *exilaskomai* and *exilasmos* do not occur at all. The only one of the Greek terms that occurs in the NT is *hilast8rion*, in Rom 3:25 and Heb 9:5.

Heb 9:5 is a description of the furniture of the tabernacle, and uses the word exactly as it is used in the LXX, to describe the cover of the ark of the covenant.

Rom 3:25 is the only case in the NT that any of these Greek terms is used in reference to Christ. It reads,

Whom God hath set forth *to be a hilast8rion* through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.

Our versions quite uniformly translate *hilast8rion* in this verse as though it were the name of a sacrifice of some sort, such as “propitiation” (AV, ASV, Douay, NASB), “expiation” (New American Bible, RSV), or even “sacrifice of atonement” (NIV). But *hilast8rion* never describes a sacrifice in the LXX. It is inconceivable that Paul, a highly educated

³ I use the character “8” to represent the Greek vowel “eta,” which sounds similar.

Greek-speaking Jew with an intimate knowledge of both the Hebrew and Greek OT, would have used this word to refer to a sacrifice. The word always indicates the mercy seat, the lid of the ark of the covenant, where the glory of God resided between the cherubim and where God met with man. This correct translation is given only by the New English Translation and the Darby Translation. In some places in the NT our Lord is set forth as the sacrifice, in others as the priest, and here as the central feature of the sanctuary itself.

Some have suggested that the word “propitiation” in 1 John 2:2; 4:10 should be understood as referring to atonement. The Greek word here is the noun *hilasmos*, related to *hilastērion*. This word occurs six times in the OT, to describe a variety of sacrifices. It corresponds twice to *kippurim* (Lev 25:9; Num 5:8), but more often to other terms, and if John had wanted to allude to atonement, he would more likely have used *exilasmos*, which is both more dominant and more devoted to *kippurim* than *hilasmos*.

The AV uses “atonement” in Rom 5:11, but the Greek word there is *katallagē* “reconciliation,” a term that the LXX never uses to translate any of the “atonement” words. Tyndale used “atone” and “atonement” three times in 2 Cor 5:18-20, also to translate *katallagē* and the related verb *katallasw*. These instances have nothing to do with the OT use of the term, but instead reflect the original meaning of the English word. “Atone” has a long history as the fusion of the phrase “at one,” and originally referred to the state of unity between two parties who had been alienated from one another. Intrinsically, this is a lovely word to describe the effect of Christ’s sacrifice, but its widespread use in the OT for the *kpr* family of terms introduces new elements of meaning that were not present in the original English term.

The NIV uses “atonement” in Rom 3:25, Heb. 9:5, and Heb 2:17. We have already discussed the first two passages. In the third, the phrase “make atonement” translates the Greek verb *hilaskomai*, which is related to *exilaskomai*. *Hilaskomai* occurs thirteen times in the LXX. Two of these have no Hebrew counterpart. Three translate *kipper* (out of 90 instances of that verb in the OT) and one translates *nikkapper* (another variation of *kipper* that appears only once). The other seven translate other terms for forgiveness, *nxm* once and *slx* six times (out of 45 instances of that verb in the OT). Clearly, *hilaskomai* is neither dominant nor devoted to *kpr*. In its only other NT use (Luke 18:13), it has the generic meaning “forgive,” and this sense is to be preferred in Heb 2:17 as well.

What does this Mean?

The NT nowhere uses the LXX words for “atonement” to describe the death of our Lord. This observation is particularly striking in view of the frequent usage of the family of Hebrew words in the OT to describe the OT sacrifices. The most important day of the Hebrew calendar from the point of view of sacrifice and forgiveness was the Day of Atonement, and the OT uses these terms frequently in describing it. The NT draws many parallels between the OT sacrifices and the death of Christ, including their redemptive character, the need for an unblemished victim, the importance of the blood, and the disposition of the bodies outside of the camp. In the light of these parallels, and the importance of the atonement vocabulary in the OT, the absence of the corresponding Greek terms can hardly be an accident. Why has the Spirit of God guided the NT writers in this way?

Scholarly opinions on the meaning of the *kpr* family of words in Hebrew has varied over the years. The older view was that these words originally meant “to cover over.” A related verb, *kafar*, is used in Gen 6:14 to describe the process of covering Noah’s ark with pitch, and it has been suggested that the use of *kapporet* to describe the lid of the ark reflects its role in covering the ark. From this perspective, *kipper* means “to cover over sin,” thus hiding it from God’s view. Later, scholars argued that the usage of the word and its relatives in sacrificial discussions indicated that its etymological roots had been forgotten. It was broadly claimed that the term should be understood in the more general sense of “to expiate, to remove sin.” However, Joseph Fitzmyer has showed convincingly [1] that Jewish readers in the first century A.D. still understood the terms in the sense of “to cover, to hide,” suggesting that the older view is in fact correct.⁴

If the OT writers consciously had in mind the notion of covering when they wrote of the atoning effect of the OT sacrifices, we can understand why NT writers would avoid these terms in reference to the death of Christ. The NT clearly teaches that the OT sacrifices were anticipatory symbols of the death of Christ, but did not have its effectiveness. Heb 10:1-18 argues that the frequent repetition of the OT offerings showed that they had no power to remove sin. Two NT passages make the case that the death of Christ actually accomplished what the animal offerings could only anticipate.

Romans 3:25 Whom God hath set forth *to be a hilast8rion* through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.

We have already considered this verse with regard to the discussion of *hilast8rion*. We should also consider the word translated “remission,” which is *paresis*, a noun occurring nowhere else in the Greek Bible. A better translation would be “passing by,” “overlooking.” God “passed by” the sins of OT people through his forbearance, an action that in itself might call into question his righteousness. The public presentation of Christ as the mercy seat, the place where God and man come together, has showed that God was in fact righteous, because he did (in the fullness of time) provide an adequate sacrifice to pay for those OT sins.

Hebrews 9:15 And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions *that were* under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.

The writer to the Hebrews also claims that Christ’s death provides redemption for the sins that were committed under the first covenant.

Both of these passages recognize that the death of Christ was the only effective payment for sins committed in the OT. The animal sacrifices did not really satisfy God’s righteous requirements. They only pointed to the coming sacrifice that could remove sin. In biblical language, the animal sacrifices “covered” sin, sweeping it under the rug, but the death of Christ removed it forever.

⁴ Understanding the root meaning of *kpr* as covering, and distinguishing this from the complete removal of sin, offers an explanation for why the NT writers would avoid the term in reference to Christ. But even if this understanding is incorrect, the striking avoidance of the term is inescapable, and the use of the same English word to describe both Israel’s central offering and the death of Christ is inexcusable.

Atonement in the New Testament

Thus it is not accidental that the NT avoids the use of the OT atonement vocabulary in discussing the death of Christ. This vocabulary characterizes a limitation of the OT sacrifices that the death of Christ overcomes. Those sacrifices only cover sin. The death of Christ removes it forever.

Ironically, this insight suggests that the English word “atonement,” in the sense of the process of making man and God “at one,” is actually more appropriate to the death of Christ than to Israel’s animal sacrifices. Those sacrifices could not make man and God “at one,” for they could not really remove sin. However, for the English-speaking believer, the term’s extensive in the OT has shifted its meaning. It is now an inescapable part of the language of the Bible, and because of this role, it is wrong to use it theologically to describe the sacrifice of Christ.

- [1] J. A. Fitzmyer. The Aramaic Language and the Study of the New Testament. *Journal of Biblical Literature.*, 99(1 (March)):5-21, 1980.