

Divine Righteousness and Forgiveness: The Old Testament Background of *Hilastērion* in Romans 3:25

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Abstract

We start with an analysis of the term *righteousness of God* in Romans 3:21–26. The righteousness as a gift to believers (genitive of source, verses 21–22) is founded on the righteousness that characterizes his being (subjective genitive, verses 24–25). However, God’s righteousness should not always be interpreted as God’s covenantal faithfulness. For the apostle, divine righteousness brings salvation and leads to judgment, as it does in the Old Testament. There the *hilastērion*, the ark cover, brings these attributes together. After investigating the background, we describe Paul’s use of the image (Rom 3:25) with the help of Jewish sources. In Christ, divine justice and mercy come together in this image. Finally, we ask to whom it applies.

Keywords

(Day of) Atonement, forgiveness, Jewish sources, mercy seat, propitiation, Romans 3, righteousness of God, *hilastērion*, reconciliation, sacrifice

Introduction

In preaching and in pastoral practice, a tension can be felt between forgiveness and the righteousness of God. How can I accept in faith that God has forgiven my iniquity while being aware that I cannot stand before a just and righteous God? This existential question can be dealt with in counseling and in the ministry of God's Word. Therefore, it is good to note that in the Bible forgiveness is inseparably related to the righteousness of God. In fact, forgiveness, as we may receive it through Jesus Christ, is a revelation of God's righteousness. In forgiving, God reveals himself as a truly just and righteous God.

The apostle Paul portrays this justice of God against a dark background. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God" (Rom 3:10–11 ESV).¹ For Paul, this is true for both Gentiles, for whom it is self-evident, and Jews: "Both of them alike are under sin" (Rom 3:9).

God reveals his righteousness through the advent of Jesus Christ to people who brought themselves into this situation from which they cannot save themselves. Christ's coming brings about something previously unthinkable and utterly impossible. This revelation of God's righteousness is entirely new. Paul describes it as the dawn of a new, eschatological era: "But now, ..." (Rom 3:21).

At the same time, the apostle connects this revelation of God's righteousness in Jesus Christ to the way God acted before toward his people Israel. Apart from the Old Testament, this new revelation cannot be rightly understood. In revealing his righteousness in Jesus Christ, God upholds his faithfulness to Israel. At the heart of Paul's argument to demonstrate this connection, he uses the word *hilastērion*. What exactly is he aiming at with the use of this word? A better understanding of it will elucidate the relation between God's revelation in the Old Testament and that in the New and the connection between divine righteousness and forgiveness.

Recall that the apostle writes here to a specific community in Rome that finds itself in a difficult situation. Jewish and Gentile believers are searching for the right relation to each other within the congregation. As the final chapters of this letter indicate, that manifested itself in conflicts. Therefore, the whole letter displays a dual focus: God is faithful to Israel, and at the same time God is opening the way of salvation to the Gentiles. This explains why Paul underlines that at the very heart of the matter, the relationship with Christ through faith, there is no longer any distinction: Jews and

¹ Unless indicated, we use the ESV. Here, Paul gives a literal quotation of Psalm 14:3.

Gentiles find themselves in the same situation and thus need the same gospel Paul is proclaiming as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16).

I. Approach

In this article, we first direct our attention to the contents of Romans 3:21–26 as a whole, as the context of Paul’s use of the term *hilastērion*. A pivotal focus in this passage is on the “righteousness of God.” In this short passage, Paul refers no less than four times to this righteousness (in vv. 21, 22, 25, and 26). What exactly does this term mean? And does Paul refer to the same notion in each of these verses?

Next, we will zoom in on the specific word *hilastērion*, which Paul uses in verse 25, translated as “propitiation” (ESV) or “sacrifice of atonement” (NIV). What exactly is the signification of this term, which he uses only once in his letters?² We will briefly review some differing opinions about its meaning.

Finally, I will show that Paul fills the key words justice, propitiation, and redemption—terms that indicate the very heart of the forgiveness of sins—with meaning from the revelation of God in the Old Testament, while at the same time connecting them to the missionary purpose of his letter for the church he is writing to.

II. Romans 3:21–26

Romans 3:21 begins with “But now.” With the coming of Jesus Christ, a new era has dawned. We live, Paul asserts here, as he does in so many other places, in the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God has come. In the Old Testament, this time was still in the future; now, through Jesus Christ, it has come. The passage ends noting the unique, eschatological moment with a similar expression: “at the present time” (v. 26).³ This awareness of living in a new era, then, encompasses the whole passage.

However, this fulfillment cannot be considered apart from God’s earlier revelation; verse 21 emphasizes that this new era is marked by a revelation of the same righteousness of God to which the law and the prophets bore witness. Even if this revealed righteousness is new, it is not something different. Anyone who reads the Old Testament encounters in it the same God and the same righteousness of God.

² The word *hilastērion* (ἱλαστήριον) occurs only twice in the New Testament: here and in Hebrews 9:5. See section III below.

³ *En tōi nun kairōi* (Ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ).

What is meant by this “righteousness of God”? Reading verses 21–22, one might think first of all of the righteousness that God grants. The genitive “of God” refers then to the One from whom this righteousness proceeds (genitive of source). It speaks of the righteousness that comes from God and before whom it can stand, in contrast to the righteousness that the law can never give. What the law cannot do, God grants in Christ. According to verse 23, all have sinned, and therefore all fall short of the glory of God. But now, “they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (v. 24).

The secret of this new reality, which happens to take place now, is described in verse 25: God has put forward Christ Jesus “as a *hilastērion* by his blood.” The precise meaning of this word *hilastērion*, which Paul uses only here, will be examined further in the next section; in any case, this *hilastērion* brings about reconciliation.⁴ It is the ground on which redemption in Christ Jesus rests. With the term “redemption” (*apolutrōsis*), Paul links the work of Jesus Christ to the earlier history of Israel. In the Old Testament, similar words chiefly refer to the exodus from Egypt and later to the new redemption from Babylonian exile.⁵ Nothing less than such a redemption is worked by God in this new era, Paul stresses by using this term.

It is clear from two other places in his letters that the apostle understands “redemption” to imply the forgiveness of sins. That is what this redemption consists of: “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph 1:7; cf. Col 1:14).⁶ In Romans 3 also, the apostle emphasizes that this redemption is only possible through the blood of Christ, and further, that this redemption can only be received by faith (“by his blood, to be received by faith,” v. 25).⁷

And so, verses 25 and 26 continue, the righteousness of God has been manifested also when God, at this time, justifies the sinner by faith in Jesus

⁴ Paul uses the term “reconciliation” (*katallagē*, καταλλαγή) in Romans 5:10–11 to indicate the result of “being justified.” I use this more personal and relational expression of the fact that man can have peace with God as an overarching term here because its reality is present in Romans 3 as well. Actually, this chapter shows how justification is related to God’s righteousness and thus demonstrates the firm ground of this reconciliation.

⁵ Although the term *apolutrōsis* (ἀπολύτρωσις) is not used in the Septuagint, verbs and nouns containing the same root are used (*lutrōsis*, *lutron*, and *lutroun*; λύτρωσις, λύτρον, and λυτροῦν), rendering the Hebrew root *yatsa* which is often employed to describe the redemption of Israel from Egypt and Babylon; cf., e.g., Deut 7:8; 9:26; Isa 41:14; 43:1; Paul evokes this semantic field here.

⁶ Paul can also use “redemption” (*apolutrōsis*, ἀπολύτρωσις) to refer to the future fulfillment of what can be experienced now in faith (Rom 8:23; Eph 1:14; 4:30; cf. Luke 21:28).

⁷ *Dia [tēs] pisteōs* (Διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως) and *en tōi autou haimati* (ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι) form a dual qualifier of this *apolutrōsis* (ἀπολύτρωσις).

Christ. Exegetes have rightly pointed out that in these verses the expression “the righteousness of God”⁸ takes on a slightly different meaning. The “righteousness” referred to here is not the righteousness that God grants, but the righteousness that marks who he is. In verses 21 and 22, we are to think of a gift that God gives to people, while in verses 24 and 25, it refers to God himself, to something that characterizes him. Herman Ridderbos, among others, interprets the passage like this: while in verses 21–22, “the righteousness of God” denotes the genitive of the source, in verses 25–26, Paul is using a subjective genitive, that is the righteousness that belongs to God’s being.⁹

Some scholars have objected that such a double meaning of the term righteousness (as an attribute of God and as a gift) would introduce too much tension into the interpretation of this passage. Rudolf Bultmann understands “the righteousness of God” in the whole passage as the righteousness that God gives and promises, whereas Ernst Käsemann prefers to approach the same term exclusively as an attribute of God himself, portraying it as the eschatological reign of God that reveals itself in Christ.¹⁰ James Dunn consistently interprets “the righteousness of God” as “God’s saving action on behalf of his people.”¹¹ It speaks of the covenant righteousness of God, of his taking the side of his covenant people, fully in line with the use of the same expression in Isaiah 51, where “righteousness” and “salvation” stand in parallel: “my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed” (Isa 51:6).

Indeed, Dunn and others rightly state that in biblical usage God’s righteousness and mercy may never be set over against each other.¹² They argue that the righteousness of God would demand that he, through Christ’s sacrifice, needed to be brought to a change of mind, as if his wrath

⁸ In verses 25–26: *dikaiosune autou* (δικαιοσύνη αὐτοῦ).

⁹ Cf. Herman Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen*, CNT (Kampen: Kok, 1959) 82–85; and Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 167–68.

¹⁰ Cf. the discussion in Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments, Band 1: Grundlegung; Von Jesus zu Paulus*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 334. He concludes that the righteousness of God has a complex meaning in this passage, referring to God’s own being just, which becomes effective in the justification of those who believe in Christ (335).

¹¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 165.

¹² Not only the adherents of the so-called *New Perspective on Paul* highlight this aspect; Otfried Hofius also characterizes God’s righteousness (*dikaiosunē Theou*, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) throughout this passage as “saving righteousness”: “so ist das Wort ‘Gerechtigkeit’—wie schon bei Deuteronesaja und in manchen Psalmen—ein Heilsbegriff”; “Sühne und Versöhnung: Zum paulinischen Verständnis des Kreuzestodes Jesu,” in Otfried Hofius, *Paulusstudien*, WUNT 51, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994), 35.

had to be assuaged by a bloody sacrifice. God would then provide this sacrifice by his mercy to ultimately satisfy his justice. This line of thinking attempts to provide a logical explanation for God's justice, one that brings this "justice" into direct opposition with another of God's attributes, his mercy. In that case, we would need this mercy as an opposite attribute to God's justice so that we could understand why God, in his justice, rightly can forgive sins.¹³

Now the beauty in this passage in the context of Paul's letter is that there is no such human construct, but there is one great point of departure, which forms a common thread through the whole passage: God is active; God reconciles. In his reconciliation God is not subjected to a principle defined by our understanding, to which he would have to comply.

Thus, there is no tension between God's justice that needs to be satisfied and God's saving faithfulness. However, the Bible still speaks of different aspects of God's righteousness.

When we read and understand the Bible properly, the righteousness of God is not exclusively a righteousness that brings salvation to all people. The righteousness of God can also bring punishment. Just a little earlier in the letter, Paul has made the connection between the righteousness of God and his wrath (Rom 3:5). In the prophecies of Isaiah, just mentioned as examples, God's "righteousness" can simply refer to his covenant faithfulness, and the term can be used in a broader sense. Isaiah 10 announces the punishment of God upon the disobedience of his people: "Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness" (v. 22, see also Isa 5:6).

How can righteousness bring salvation on the one hand and punishment on the other? Does that mean that, dealing with God's righteousness, one would just have to wait and see which side one would face? It has been rightly pointed out that one overarching motif typifies the righteousness of God when it brings salvation to his people, that is, "his loyalty to his own name."¹⁴ Time and again we read that God's righteousness takes a stand for his name and his glory.¹⁵

That is precisely why in the Old Testament the righteousness of God brought salvation to Israel in exile: at that moment God will stand up for his own honor. "For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my

¹³ This line of thought can be traced back to Anselm of Canterbury's 1098 *Cur Deus homo*.

¹⁴ Cf. John Piper, "The Demonstration of the Righteousness of God in Romans 3:25, 26," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 7 (1980): 21–22.

¹⁵ When God upholds his righteousness, his purpose is that people are once again bound to his glory, his *doxa* (δόξα), so that God regains the honor that is due to him. A little earlier in this chapter, Paul indicates the consequence of sin as the exact opposite: it is this glory of God that people fall short of (Rom 3:23).

praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off” (Isa 48:9). The righteousness of God brings salvation for his covenant people since his name is bound up with them. For the same reason, God can also arise in punishment for his honor when his name is dishonored. In both cases, we are dealing with the same righteousness of God, which includes both his wrath and his salvation. Thus, these aspects are not to be contrasted as two different attributes of God. The same righteousness of God is concerned, which is particularly revealed in the atoning sacrifice that God has put forward.

III. Hilastērion as “Means” or “Place” of Reconciliation

Paul points out that God “put forward” or “appointed” Christ as a *hilastērion* (Rom 3:25). Christ is the foundation on which our redemption rests. In Christ, something completely new in the revelation of God’s righteousness is portrayed, which at the same time is connected to the revelation of God in the Old Testament. In short, this *hilastērion* as God’s way of bringing about reconciliation is the heart of the whole passage.

What exactly does this word denote? As we have noted earlier, the apostle does not use it anywhere else in his letters, which makes it extra difficult to define its exact meaning. The only other place in the New Testament where *hilastērion* is used is in Hebrews 9:5. There, fully consistent with the usage of the term in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, it means “mercy seat” (ESV) or “atonement cover” (NIV). In the Septuagint, this word occurs twenty-eight times, almost exclusively as a translation of the Hebrew word for the golden cover that lay on the ark in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle.¹⁶

At first glance, it seems rather strange to translate Paul in line with this Old Testament usage: God has brought forward Christ as a “seat” or “cover.” In this context, one would rather expect an indication of the means of reconciliation, the blood of his atoning sacrifice, than an indication of the place where the sacrifice occurs. That is why many translations choose a more general rendering: the means of reconciliation, being more neutral than “mercy seat,” the place of reconciliation. Grammatically, the Greek *hilastērion* has adjectival form and may be translated as “reconciliatory.”¹⁷ Hence, it is possible to insert a noun, in order to understand what is meant by this

¹⁶ E.g., Exodus 25:17–22; 27:34, Leviticus 16:2, and elsewhere. There is just one exception: in Ezekiel 43:14–17, *hilastērion* (ἱλαστήριον) does not refer to the atonement cover but to the edge of the altar.

¹⁷ This is a nominalized adjective: “that which belongs to reconciliation.”

“reconciliatory thing.” Practically, *hilastērion* could therefore mean the same as the “blood” that reconciles, which Paul mentions in immediate connection to it, or, more generally, Christ’s reconciliatory “sacrifice.”

However, if the term should be read in this way, why does Paul not simply use the word “blood,” or “sacrifice,” as he does more often? Why does he place precisely this particular word, *hilastērion*, which he uses nowhere else in the epistle, at the center of his train of thought? It is fruitful here to reflect on the background of this word. Which context is Paul drawing on here? Might this background help us to understand the unique character of the reconciliation accomplished by Christ, as well as its connection to the revelation of the righteousness of God, to which the law and the prophets bear witness, as he has just pointed out (v. 21)?

In broad outlines, exegetes identify three distinct meanings for *hilastērion*, meanings that arise from three distinct contexts in which the word occurs.

First, in Hellenistic Greek usage, the expression *hilastērion* denotes a concept that is connected to pagan cultic practice. It denotes a votive offering. That is how Josephus uses this word.¹⁸ We find in an inscription a reference to a *hilastērion* as the “propitiation,” intended to evoke a favorable disposition of the gods toward the worshiper.¹⁹ Behind it is the idea of *do ut des*: “I give so that you[, god,] give back to me.” Exegetes who translate *hilastērion* in accordance with this Greek usage suppose that this context of *do ut des* could still be present in Paul’s mind. One scholar who explicitly chooses the translation of “votive offering” in Romans 3:25 acknowledges, though, that in the situation of Romans 3 this votive offering is of a very unique kind because God provides this *hilastērion* himself.²⁰ This interpretation would imply that God has given Christ as a gift with the intention that he will change his disposition towards his people. This, then, should be understood within the context of Paul’s missionary approach: over against pagan idolatry, we have a votive offering that God himself has provided.

However, we could ask whether such a missionary approach would be helpful to persuade Gentiles to accept Christ as their *hilastērion*? Would they really be brought to other thoughts about God’s atonement? Does this not maintain that God must be brought to other thoughts through this sacrifice? How is that compatible with Paul’s insistence throughout the passage that God himself is the subject of this reconciliatory action?

¹⁸ Josephus uses it as a pure adjective in the expression *hilastērion mnēma* (ἱλαστήριον μνῆμα; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 16.182).

¹⁹ See Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer*, EKK 6.1 (Neukirchen: Patmos, 2014), 257.

²⁰ Stefan Schreiber, “Weitergedacht: Das versöhnende Weihegeschenk Gottes in Röm 3, 25,” *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 106 (2015): 213.

Second, rather than a pagan cultic context, we might look for the background of the term *hilastērion* within a Jewish context. In one apocryphal text, the noun is used to denote “propitiation.” In 4 Maccabees 17:21–22, Eleazar the priest and a family of seven brothers, martyred at the hands of the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes, give their lives as a “ransom for the sin of [their] nation.” In the next verse, this sacrifice is identified as an “atoning sacrifice” (*hilastērion*).²¹ In this manner “divine Providence preserved Israel that had previously been mistreated.”²² This is the only place known to us in intertestamental literature where the blood of human beings is described as an atoning sacrifice, and it is so described by precisely this word, *hilastērion*, drawn from the Day of Atonement. By this term their death is characterized as atoning.

That this usage occurs only once demonstrates that this expression is not the usual way to interpret the death of a martyr. Thus, Paul is not taking up a current usage of this term that would provide a conceptual context for understanding it. Moreover, Christ’s sacrifice, as Paul speaks of it, differs greatly from the martyrdom of Eleazar and his companions, who did not present themselves as a sacrifice but were executed. In 4 Maccabees, a text dating from the same period in which Paul was writing, the atoning significance of their death is only assigned as an afterthought, adding meaning to their death as martyrs. That is quite different from what we read in Romans 3:25, namely that God himself took the initiative, putting Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood.²³

Third, the most obvious conclusion, then, is that Paul took over the word *hilastērion* from the Old Testament, where it was used in the context of the Day of Atonement. In almost every instance where the term occurs in the Greek Old Testament, it refers to the golden cover over the ark—traditionally translated as “mercy seat”—and so it was used on the Day of Atonement

²¹ There is a text-critical issue here. Codex Alexandrinus reads, “διὰ ... τοῦ ἱλαστηρίου θανάτου αὐτῶν” (*dia ... tou hilastēriou thanatou autōn*; by their atoning death), whereas Sinaiticus repeats the particle τοῦ (*tou*), which supposes a more substantive reading of *hilastērion*: “διὰ ... τοῦ ἱλαστηρίου τοῦ θανάτου αὐτῶν” (*dia tou hilastēriou tou thanatou autōn*; by the atonement of their death).

²² Fourth Maccabees 17:22 (NRSV).

²³ Because of the hymnic style of verses 24–26, scholars assume that Paul echoes a traditional early Jewish Christian formula here. Peter Stuhlmacher demonstrates that this formula is probably not shaped by the adjective use in 4 Maccabees 17:22, as Ernst Lohse suggests. He supposes that in the earlier “Paradosis” the connection between Christ’s sacrifice and the Old Testament usage of the term in the context of the Day of Atonement—as will be elaborated in the next paragraph—had already been established. See Peter Stuhlmacher, “Zur neueren Exegese von Röm 3, 24–26,” in *Versöhnung, Gesetz und Gerechtigkeit: Aufsätze zur biblischen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 117–35.

(Lev 16). The *hilastērion* covers the ark, the place where the Lord says that he will appear: “For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat” (Lev 16:2). For this reason, even Aaron may not come into the Most Holy Place, “before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die” (Lev 16:2).

Only because Aaron makes atonement for himself, the sanctuary, and the people may this place continue as the place where God has communion with his people. Moreover, God has so ordered everything that such a meeting is possible. He has provided blood for that purpose, says Leviticus 17:11, “to make atonement for your souls.” That is the essence of the sacrificial ritual: God has provided this so that another life might be presented to him in place of the life of the people.

On the Day of Atonement, this sacrificial rite is brought back to its heart: First, Aaron must present a large incense offering so that when he lifts the corner of the veil, the cloud of incense hides the mercy seat from his view. Then, he is to sprinkle with his finger the blood of a bull as a sin offering for himself: one droplet on the mercy seat itself, and seven drops in front of it. Next, he is to do exactly the same with the blood of the goat as the atonement for the people. The Mishnah, a second-century Jewish collection of commentaries on the law, describes how the high priest was to perform that: he was forbidden to aim at a specific spot as he sprinkled; rather, he had to make a swinging, to-and-fro movement, “as though he were wielding a whip” (m. Yoma 5:4).²⁴ That was how it was done: even when the smoke of incense had dissipated somewhat, he was still not allowed to look at the spot where the blood actually landed. That is what the Most Holy Place demonstrated at the most holy instant: a priest, sprinkling a few droplets of blood, just as God had commanded. And that was sufficient.

What, then, was that sacrifice? Was it a gift to the deity? Does this practice of atonement resemble, in any way, the pagan *do ut des*? Do we give something to God to receive something from him in return? From this detailed description, we do not get the impression that the people of God can pride themselves on a great gift with which they can show off and present themselves before God. On the contrary, the emphasis is on the smallness of the offering. Just a few droplets of blood: that is all. Of course, these few droplets still point to a far greater mystery. They point to what ought to happen and to what does happen, symbolically: with these few blood droplets the entire life of the priest and that of the people who stand behind him are presented to God.

Placing the sins upon the sacrificial animal or presenting just a small part of yourself to God is not enough to be reconciled; rather, the essence of the

²⁴ Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 168.

sacrificial service is that the one who presents the offering offers himself. That is symbolically represented with the laying on of hands, not just the presentation of a small part of oneself but a complete identification.²⁵ Thus, in Numbers 8:10, the whole congregation of Israel placed their hands upon the Levites—representing them before God—and the Levites in turn placed their hands on the sacrificial animals to represent them before God. In the sacrifice, the life—or more accurately, the self, the whole person—of the one making the sacrifice dies. And this happens at the place God has appointed for this ritual: that is, the mercy seat. The priest stands there, with a few drops of blood, in which the whole people are present; at the same time, it is where the Lord himself appears in this ritual, precisely in this way.

Indeed, there are two movements here: one from the people to God, through the life that represents the self, and another from God toward his people. But this is not some kind of votive offering intended to gain something in return or somehow to secure the deity's favor. It is rather the reverse: he is the first to give, and what people offer him is a giving back to him, an acknowledgment of what he gave first. It is not *do ut des* ("I give so you may give in return"); rather, *do quia dedisti* ("I give because you gave first").²⁶

These, indeed, are two movements: from us to God and from God to us, but these movements are framed by a much greater, all-encompassing movement that surrounds them: all this is given by God himself. That is foundational. He provides the mercy seat where the two movements become visible. That is the place where this happens, and it happens on the day that God has appointed.

Based on Leviticus 16:30, "for on this day shall atonement be made for you," Jewish tradition holds that the sins, for which sacrifices are made throughout the year, are only truly atoned for on the Day of Atonement. According to the Mishnah, sins committed in the course of the year are suspended for the whole year through the daily sacrifices; it is not until the Day of Atonement that they are actually done away with (m. Yoma 8:8).

IV. *Christ as "Mercy Seat"*

By using the word *hilastērion*, Paul makes an implicit reference to the heart of the Old Testament ministry of reconciliation. The allusion to what happens on the Day of Atonement helps explain what he writes about Christ's work

²⁵ Regarding this identification, see Wolfgang Kraus, "Der Jom Kippur, der Tod Jesu und die 'Biblische Theologie': Ein Versuch, die jüdische Tradition in die Auslegung von Röm 3,25f. einzubeziehen," *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 6 (1991): 163.

²⁶ See Hofius, "Sühne und Versöhnung," 40.

of redemption. Christ does not merely bring a piece of man to God, some sins; no, the life of the sacrificer is brought to God and dies there, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14: “One has died for all, therefore all have died.”²⁷ At the same time, this is how God himself comes to his own. The double movement of the presentation of the sacrifice and of the acceptance of this life instead of the people’s life is encompassed by the will of God: this is how he reveals his righteousness. This is more than a “display,” an illustration of what this reconciliation is about. It is the ultimate confirmation of this reconciliation itself, demonstrating God’s righteousness. That is how God is: he confirms “that he is just” also when he is “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26).²⁸ Here he reveals who he is, righteous, in a way in which righteousness, faithfulness, and mercy will never contravene each other.

It is noteworthy that Paul says in this context that God, “in his forbearance, passed over former sins” until the present time.²⁹ In this word, too, we hear an echo of the Jewish ritual of the Day of Atonement. All sins are stored up until this particular day because this is the specific day God appointed to make atonement. Christ represents all those who have sinned. This representation takes place on a specific day, the day that God has appointed, and at a specific place, where God and man meet: the mercy seat. We could say that Christ himself is the mercy seat upon which everything is concentrated. Both movements, the movement from God to us and that from us to God, are encompassed by the great movement of God, who has given us this mercy seat. Christ is also the blood, the life that is sacrificed. He is also the one who sacrifices himself as a priest, but he is also the mercy seat, the place where everything comes together, which must be understood from this context.

Regarding the forgiveness of sins, this means not merely that the redemption in Christ removes a certain number of sins, or even all sins, but that the complete person dies there; as a result, a person receives a completely new life. Sin is not merely washed off the person; rather, the whole person is separated from the old life and transferred into a new life because God is there, where I am sacrificed: at the mercy seat. This forgiveness has now become a reality—through the coming of Christ, as Romans 3:21, 26 emphasizes. This wonderful reality can be applied in preaching and pastoral counseling, bringing divine justice and forgiveness together in the same movement of God’s mercy.

²⁷ Cf. Stuhlmacher, “Zur neueren Exegese,” 134.

²⁸ *Endeixis* (ἐνδειξις, evidence) not only displays something, it also confirms it: *eis to einai auton dikaion* (εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον; “so that he is just”).

²⁹ *Paresis* (πάρεσις, passing by; Rom 3:25).

V. Christ, the Ultimate Fulfillment

To whom does this reality apply? In conclusion, we note the following three aspects.

In the first place, this applies not only to people who had sinned until that moment but also to sinners living later. In Romans 6, Paul writes about Jesus's sacrifice having been completed "once and for all."³⁰ The sins stored up for the Day of Atonement were not only sins committed before that day but also those committed afterward.³¹ In the words "once and for all," we hear the ultimate concentration of time and place: what happens here refers to what happened upon the mercy seat in the tabernacle, but now once and for all time.

In the second place, this does not apply only to Israel. Christ fulfilled the heart of Israel's service of worship in complete harmony with what God had revealed to Israel. He performed it not in seclusion, in the Holy of Holies, but in a public place, and he was "put forward"³² by God himself. From that very moment, his atonement no longer counts for Jews only but for Greeks also; it counts for all without distinction (Rom 3:22). That is the newness of God's gospel in Christ. There is continuity with Israel's ministry and its openness toward all nations, as Paul continually emphasizes in Romans.

In the third place, this significant broadening also occurs alongside an exclusive narrowing as redemption applies only to those who believe. This narrowing, however, entails an open and missionary purpose. Paul, in this entire passage, guides us to the significance of faith. These verses serve as an appeal to see and acknowledge God's work at his mercy seat, where Christ is the mercy seat "by faith."³³ By this faith I bind myself to him who gave his blood, his life, to represent me before God. Thus, anyone "who is by faith in Jesus" is justified.³⁴ For them, faith is the source of forgiveness because Christ is the source, the mercy seat, the place where they may appear before God, and where God appears to them.

³⁰ *Ephapax* (ἐφάπαξ; Rom 6:10).

³¹ Cf. also Stuhlmacher, "Zur neueren Exegese," 135–36.

³² *Pro-etheto* (προέθετο; Rom 3:25).

³³ *Dia [tēs] pisteōs* (διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως; Rom 3:25).

³⁴ *Dikaionta ton ek pisteōs Iēsou* (δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ; "the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus"; Rom 3:26).



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