

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATING
ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι
IN ROMANS 3:25a

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There is a common consensus among commentators that Rom 3:25a refers to the sacrificial significance of the Cross. Although there is no consensus on how to translate the term ἱλαστήριον, most commentators agree that the term at least refers to “the mercy seat” of the OT.¹ Yet this exegetical nuance is rarely reflected in translation. The purpose of this study is to show that the bulk of the problem lies with the translation of ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι. The normal translations given are “in his blood”² or “by his blood,”³ or “by means of his blood,”⁴ “by shedding his blood,”⁵

¹For bibliography see Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Gospel and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 53-55. For a balanced discussion on the subject, see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 170-171.

²John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Whetham, 1836), 143; Dunn, 170; James Edwards, *Romans*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 105; Nico S. L. Fryer, “The Meaning and Translation of in Romans 3:25” *EvQ* 59 (1987):107; Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 10:44; Arland Hultgren, *Paul's Gospel and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 57; John Knox, “The Epistle to the Romans,” *IB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 9:432; R.C.H. Lenski suggests “in (connection with) his blood” (*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961], 256); Ben F. Meyer, “The Pre-Pauline Formula in Rom 3:25-26a,” *NTS* 29 (1983): 202-204; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 237; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 182; H.C.G. Moule, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, vol. 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 86; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, 2 vols., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:120; Norman H. Young, “‘Hilaskesthai’ and Related Words in the New Testament,” *EvQ* 55 (1983): 171.

³Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 104-106; Matthew Black, *Romans*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 60; F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 99; R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1970), 1:46; J. Oswald Dykes, *The Gospel According to St. Paul* (London: J. Nisbet, 1888), 80; Arland J. Hultgren, 59, 71; Knox, 9:433, 434; C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 78; Rousas John Rushdoony, *Romans and Galatians* (Vallecito, CA: Ross, 1997), 52; John A. Ziesler,

and “through his blood.”⁶ The problem is that none of these translations allows *ἱλαστήριον* to be rendered as “the mercy seat.”⁷ For example, “the mercy seat in his blood,” “the mercy seat by means of his blood,” or “the mercy seat through his blood” are all awkward. This problem, among other things, has forced translators into rendering *ἱλαστήριον* in a variety of ways: “the means of expiating sin by his sacrificial death”⁸; “a reconciling sacrifice”⁹; and “sacrifice for reconciliation.”¹⁰ The choice between “expiation”¹¹ and “propitiation”¹² has led to a heated discussion about which of the two is correct,¹³ and to the NRSV’s compromise: “a sacrificial atonement.” In my opinion, the problem lies with *ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι* rather than *ἱλαστήριον*. One further problem is *διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως*, which intervenes between *ἱλαστήριον* and *ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι*.¹⁴ It is

“Salvation Proclaimed: IX. Romans 3:21-26,” *ExpTim* 93 (1982): 358.

⁶C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 210; Roy A. Harrisville, *Romans*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 62; Bruce W. Longenecker, “Pistis in Romans 3:25: Neglected Evidence for the ‘Faithfulness of Christ?’” *NTS* 39 (1933): 479; Randolph O. Yeager, “Romans 1:1-8:39,” *The Renaissance New Testament* (Bowling Green, KY: Renaissance, 1982), 362.

⁷Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959), 46; William Hendrikson, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 1:128.

⁸J. W. Colenso, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1861), 89; William G. Colman, *The Cathedral of Christian Truth: Studies in Romans* (Findlay, OH: Fundamental Truth, 1943), 98.

⁹The Tyndale Bible (1534) appears to be the only exception: “a seate of mercy thorow faith in his bloud.” The Amplified Bible’s convoluted “a mercy seat and propitiation” fails to qualify as a translation.

¹⁰NEB.

¹¹Berkeley Version; New Berkeley Version.

¹²New Jerusalem Bible.

¹³RSV; NAB.

¹⁴Douay; NASB; AV; ASV; RV; Modern Reader’s Bible; Moffat.

¹⁵Anthony J. Guerra, *Romans and the Apologetic Tradition: The Purpose, Genre and Audience of Paul’s Letter*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, no. 81 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 73; Dunn, 170, 171.

¹⁶Ernst Käsemann notes: “The sentence is difficult syntactically. It seems that *en tō autou haimmati* should go with *hilastērion*, corresponding to 5:9. . . . But the position and the sense prevent *dia pisteōs* from being linked to the verb. The appositions jostle one another” (*Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 97-98).

unclear what to do with διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως. It is commonly accepted as a parenthetical insertion into a pre-Pauline fragment.¹⁵ Yet this is very difficult to convey in a translation. So most translators have fallen back to the rendering “by faith” or “through faithfulness.”¹⁶ In either case, it hinders a smooth translation of the verse and does not connect meaningfully either to ἰλαστήριον or to ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι.¹⁷

All this can be solved by translating ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι as “with his blood.” The resultant translation would go like this: “whom God set forth as the mercy seat . . . with his blood (upon it).”¹⁸ In other words, the prepositional phrase would be taken as describing “attendant circumstances” or “accompaniment,” which is how C.F.D. Moule categorizes it.¹⁹ This would allow ἰλαστήριον to be translated as “the mercy seat,” which most commentators agree it means. Also, rendering ἰλαστήριον literally as “mercy seat,” rather than “expiation” or “propitiation,” has the added advantage of preserving the Jewish quality of this fragment in a translation. Accordingly, the rendition “with his blood” would mean that we translate διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως as “through (his) (covenant) faithfulness,” which is also in keeping with the fragment’s Jewish character. The verse would then be translated as follows: “whom God set forth as the mercy seat through his faithfulness, with his blood upon it.” This translation would give us a window into how the first Christians came to see the salvific significance of the Cross: they recognized an open sanctuary with its inner veil pulled apart, exposing the mercy seat with the fresh blood of the Covenant Maker thrown upon it.

¹⁵Alfons Pluta, *Gottes Bundestreue: Ein Schlüsselbegriff in Röm 3,25a*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, vol. 34 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969), 41; Dunn, 172. Whether the pre-Pauline fragment should include vv. 24 and 26 is a matter of dispute; there is no dispute over v. 25; for details see Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*, Marshall's Theological Library (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), 81-85.

¹⁶Pluta devotes his entire monograph to advocate that διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως should be understood as “by God’s covenant faithfulness.” Käsemann, 98, brushes aside Pluta’s suggestion without explanation. It appears that this attractive suggestion has not been given adequate attention because of the awkwardness it presents in translation.

¹⁷For a catalog of syntactical possibilities, see Pluta, 39-40.

¹⁸My suggestion comes very close to that of Moses Stuart, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: William Tegg and Co., 1853), 152: “It may be said, that if Christ be represented as the *mercy-seat* which was sprinkled with propitiatory blood, *haimati autou* may refer to this.” This idea just has not made it into any of the translations.

¹⁹Moule, 78; but his own translation of “to deal with sin . . . by his blood” does not express the full meaning of this usage.