Propitiation: This Unbiblical Word May Be in Your Bible

JULY 13, 2019 BY JACK HELLEIN

When you open an English translation of the Bible to **Romans 3.25**, depending upon which version it is, you may encounter the word propitiation referring to Jesus. For instance, the King James Version reads:

> *"whom God hath set forth to be a* ***propitiation*** *through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;*

Other versions use the word *expiation* or the phrase *atoning sacrifice* or something similar. At first glance, these various translations may impress themselves on our mind as meaning more-or-less the same thing. However, when we dig into study, we will find that they actually have very different, even opposing meanings. I encourage you to study with me and on your own, to see how the word choice of different translation committees (responsible for what

ends up in various versions of the Bible) reflects on the character – or lack of character as we will see – of my Father and yours.
Most importantly, I want to convey that how we perceive God on this topic can very much affect – either positively or negatively – our intimacy with Him.

Here's a look at some of the variations in English translations of **Romans 3.25**, as well as the Latin translation and the Greek:

Greek NT	Latin Vulgate	Wycliffe	King James
25 ον προεθετο ο Θεος ιλαστηριον δια της πιστεως εν τω	25 quem proposuit Deus propitiationem per fidem in sanguine ipsius,	25 Whom God purposide[p] an helpere by feith in his blood, to the schewinge	Jesus: 25 Whom God hath set forth[c] *to be* a propitiation through faith in

Young's Literal	New Revised Standard	New International	New American Standard
Jesus, 25whom God did set forth a mercy seat, through the faith in his	25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,[i m] through the	Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement[e] by his blood, effec-	Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as [a]a [1]propitiation [2b]in His blood

Romans 3.25 in Greek and seven translations

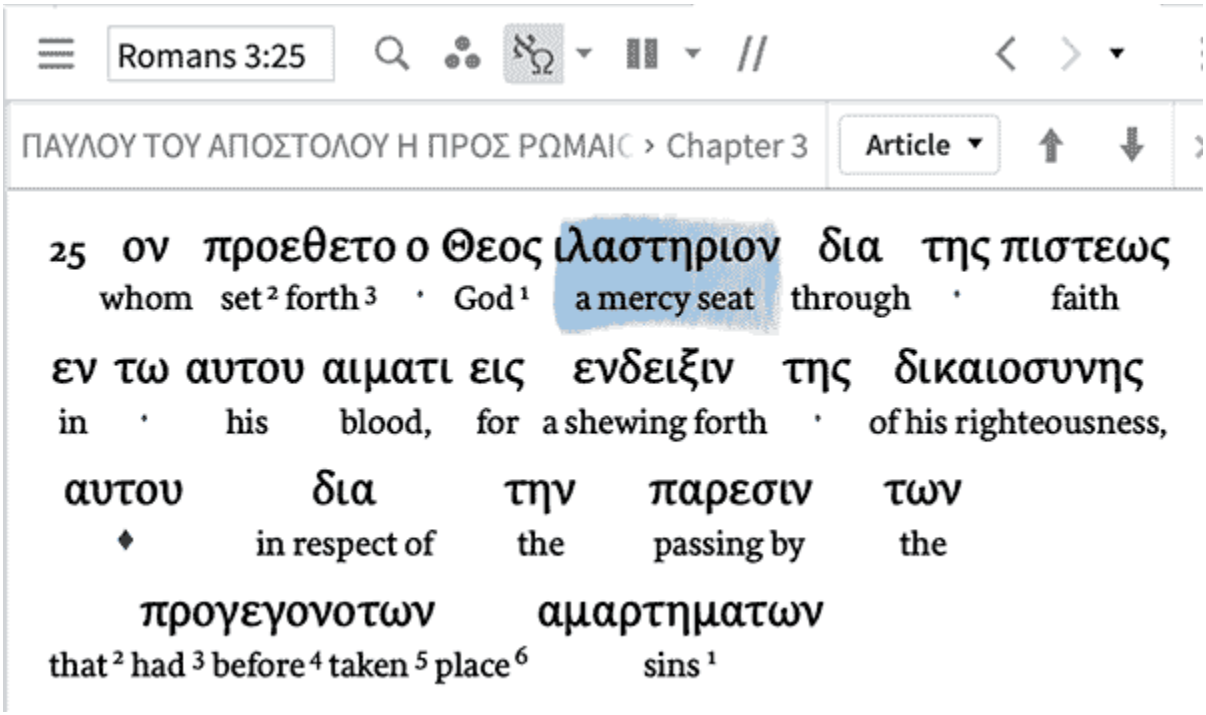
Before we look specifically at Paul's use of *hilasterion* in this passage, here are the two Latin/English words most often used to translate that Greek word:

- **Expiation** – the act of making atonement or the means by which atonement is made (originally a Latin word)
- **Propitiation** – win or regain the favor of (a god, spirit, or person) by doing something that pleases them (originally a Latin word)

Looking at these two definitions, it seems to me that English phrases like *atoning sacrifice*, used in some translations, are closer to the idea of *expiation* than the idea of *propitiation*.

Do you see the difference between the two ideas behind these two words? Perhaps it is not obvious yet but I believe that the difference will become more apparent as we investigate **Romans 3.25**, which, by the way, is the only place in the New Testament where Paul uses the word *hilasterion* (its root is also used in the book of Hebrews and in the letters of John).

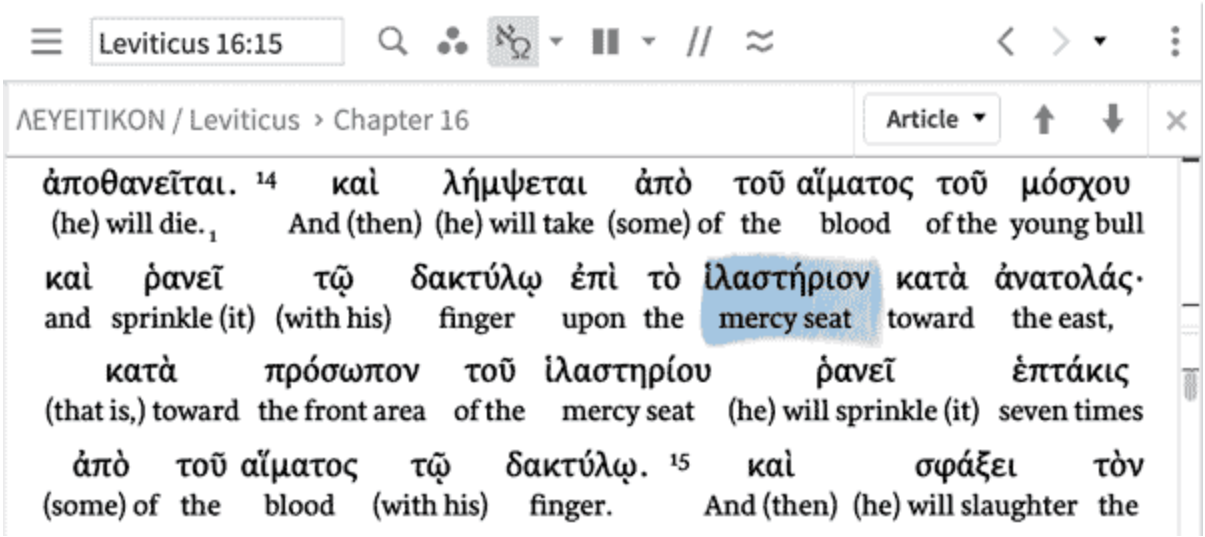
The letters of Paul, of course, were not written in English or in Latin but in a dialect of ancient Greek. So when Paul wrote, he did not use either *expiation* or *propitiation*. Neither of those words are in the earliest manuscripts of Paul's letters that we have available to us. As mentioned above, Paul used the Greek word *hilsaterion* (ιλαστηριον):



Romans 3.25 in the Newberry Greek New Testament Interlinear

Underneath the word hilasterion in the Greek Interlinear New Testament above, we see the English translation *mercy seat*. Where does *that* come from? Paul was familiar with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The **Septuagint**, as it is called, had been translated from Hebrew in Alexandria a few hundred years before Paul's time at the order of the first King Ptolemy, who was doing his best to gather as much information as possible from as many cultures as possible in his new library in Alexandria. In the Septuagint, we find that the word *hilasterion* (ιλαστηριον) is used to translate the Hebrew kahporet (כַּפֹּרֶת), the word used for the lid – with the carved images of the two

cherubs facing each other – of the Ark of the Covenant. These were located inside the Tabernacle or Temple in the Holy of Holies chamber (see **Leviticus 16.15** below and other passages):



Leviticus 16.5 in the Septuagint Interlinear

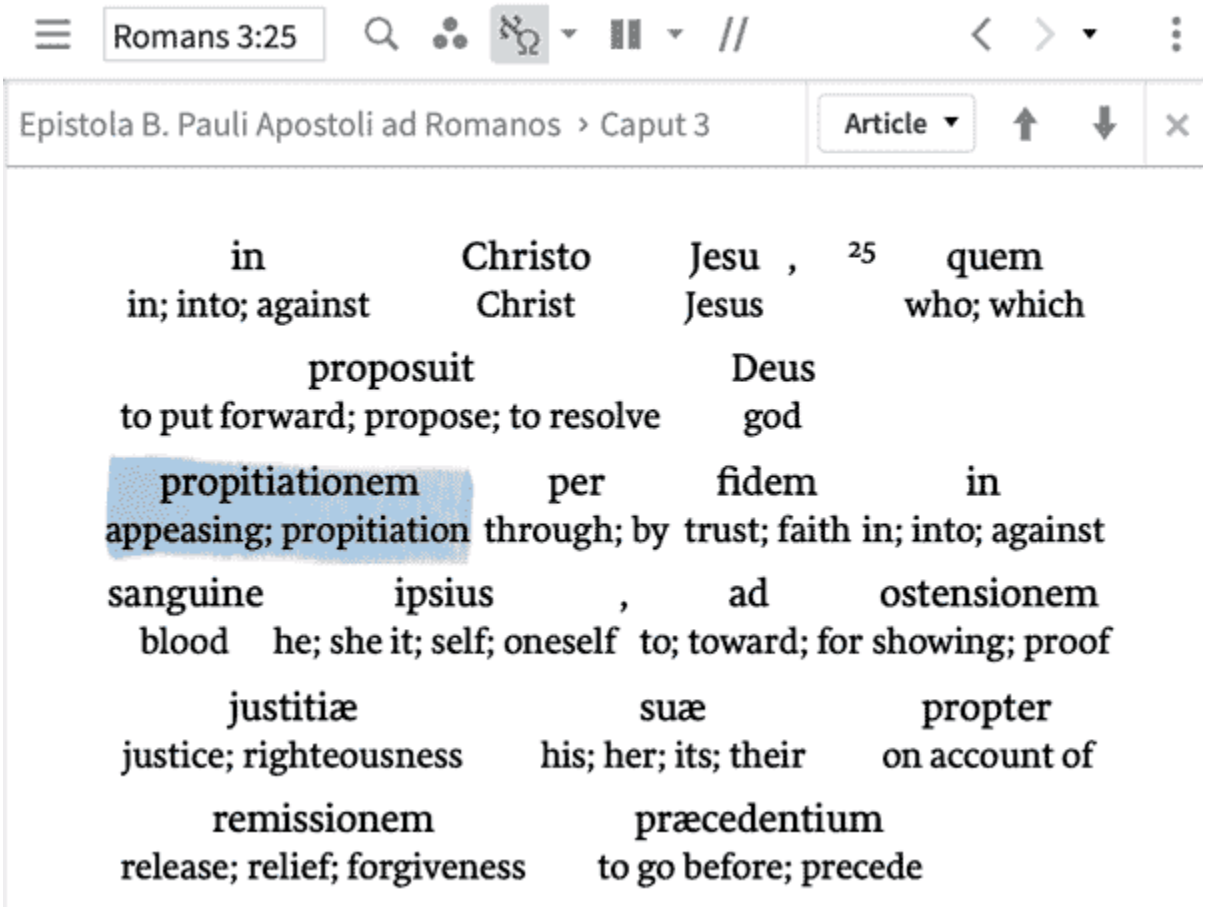
As you can see, *hilasterion* is translated "mercy seat". It was in front of the Ark of the Covenant, and the Mercy Seat that covered it, that the sins of the nation of Israel were atoned for once a year – and the tabernacle purified – during Yom Kipporim, literally "Day of Coverings." The whole picture of the atonement that occurred at the mercy seat offers us a beautiful picture of God taking action on behalf of His people. So that's where Paul got the idea of hilsaterion from. It's a picture that he wants to use to share with us about who God is as revealed through Jesus.

Coming back to **Romans 3.25** then, the simplest, most literal way to read the verse is that God set forth Jesus as a mercy seat. In Young's Literal Translation of the Bible, that's exactly what we read:

> *Whom God did set forth as a mercy seat*

But of course, we don't get that simple, literal picture in most English translations of the Bible. And if we never dig deeper to look at the original languages behind the translations, we would lose something of Paul's real meaning in this passage. So let's dig!

The divergence away from the straightforward Biblical picture of God providing atonement (oneness with Him), which should be included for us in translations, can be seen clearly at least as early as the Fourth Century in the Latin translation of the Bible, the **Vulgate**. In the Vulgate, the word *propitiation* is used in **Romans 3.25**. A couple of hundred years before **Jerome** published the Vulgate, the idea of Jesus as a propitiation – in contrast to the mercy seat image – may have been introduced into Christianity through the pagan convert **Tertullian**, who lived in the Roman province of Carthage. After his conversion, he wrote extensively in Latin about Christianity and is considered the father of Latin (Western) Christianity. In the process, he coined a lot of Latin terms that are still used today. Unfortunately, but perhaps not surprisingly, it seems evident that some of his pagan ideas about God, with which he grew up, made their way into His writing.



Propitiation in **Romans 3.25** in the Vulgate Interlinear

As we can see from the translation below the Latin *propitiationem*, *propitiation* carries with it the idea of

appeasement, an essentially pagan perception of God. From here, we can begin to see the deep problem that arises when we see appeasing God – propitiation – as what Paul is communicating in **Romans 3.25**. Unfortunately, many or even most Bible teachers, in Western Christianity at least, seem to have little problem with the portrait of a Father Who requires appeasement.

If we read **Romans 3.25** carefully, we should be able to see that our God is the one Who is acting as the subject in this passage. Paul writes that it is God Who is setting forth Jesus as the *hilasterion*. If we were going with the "appeasement" idea included in propitiation, we would end up with God taking action to appease Himself. While this occurs to me as nonsensical, in Western Christianity in particular, our Bible teachers have heavily promoted what I would call this dark side of God.

Just as I am writing this, for example, I came across this statement from Tim Keller in a friend's Facebook post:

> *"Christians know that Jesus took the ultimate darkness of God's wrath (**Matthew 27.45**). Since he took the abandonment we deserve, we know that God will not abandon us (**Hebrews 13.5**). He is there with us, even when we can't feel him at all."*

"The ultimate darkness of God's wrath"? Somehow, Keller gets from the darkness that occurred while Jesus was on the cross (**Matthew 27.45**) that there is darkness in God. Of course, the Apostle John disagrees with such an assessment of God's character (**1 John 1.5**), but there is this idea running throughout most of Western Christian thought that God was angry with us and Jesus, specifically the death of Jesus, serves as a propitiation or an appeasement so that now the Father is no longer angry with us.

God's children should reject such dark pictures of Him – portrayed by well-meaning but misled (and so misleading) Bible teachers – wherever they encounter them. Beyond that, we can see for ourselves that God is not being acted upon in **Romans 3.25** (being appeased or propitiated); rather, He is the One acting to bring atonement and to reconcile His children to Him. God is the subject, not the object of what is happening in **Romans 3.25**. Jesus, the *hilasterion* or mercy

seat who is being set forth by God, is a direct object (accusative case) in the sentence, and we are the ones who are receiving the benefit of God's actions.

Before I close with how I believe this affects our relationship with God, it seems to me that a quick look at how Paul talked about reconciliation between God and us will help reinforce why the use of *propitiation* in translations of the Bible misrepresents what Paul meant in **Romans 3.25**. Throughout Paul's writing, he only uses the word reconciliation to talk about God acting to reconcile us to Him, or calling us to be reconciled to Him (see **Romans 5.10** and **2 Corinthians 5.18-20**). He *never* writes about God being reconciled to us, because God's attitude toward us — His perfect love for us that always acts for our highest welfare — has never changed. God, from Paul's perspective, doesn't need to change toward us, He has always loved us and always will. We are the ones that need to turn back to Him and be reconciled to Him.

So whatever Jesus accomplished on the cross was directed at us, to call us back to God. It was not directed at God, to change the Father's heart toward us. God was not appeased by Jesus's death on the cross. God loved you already and has done all He could, even sending His own Son to call you back to Him.

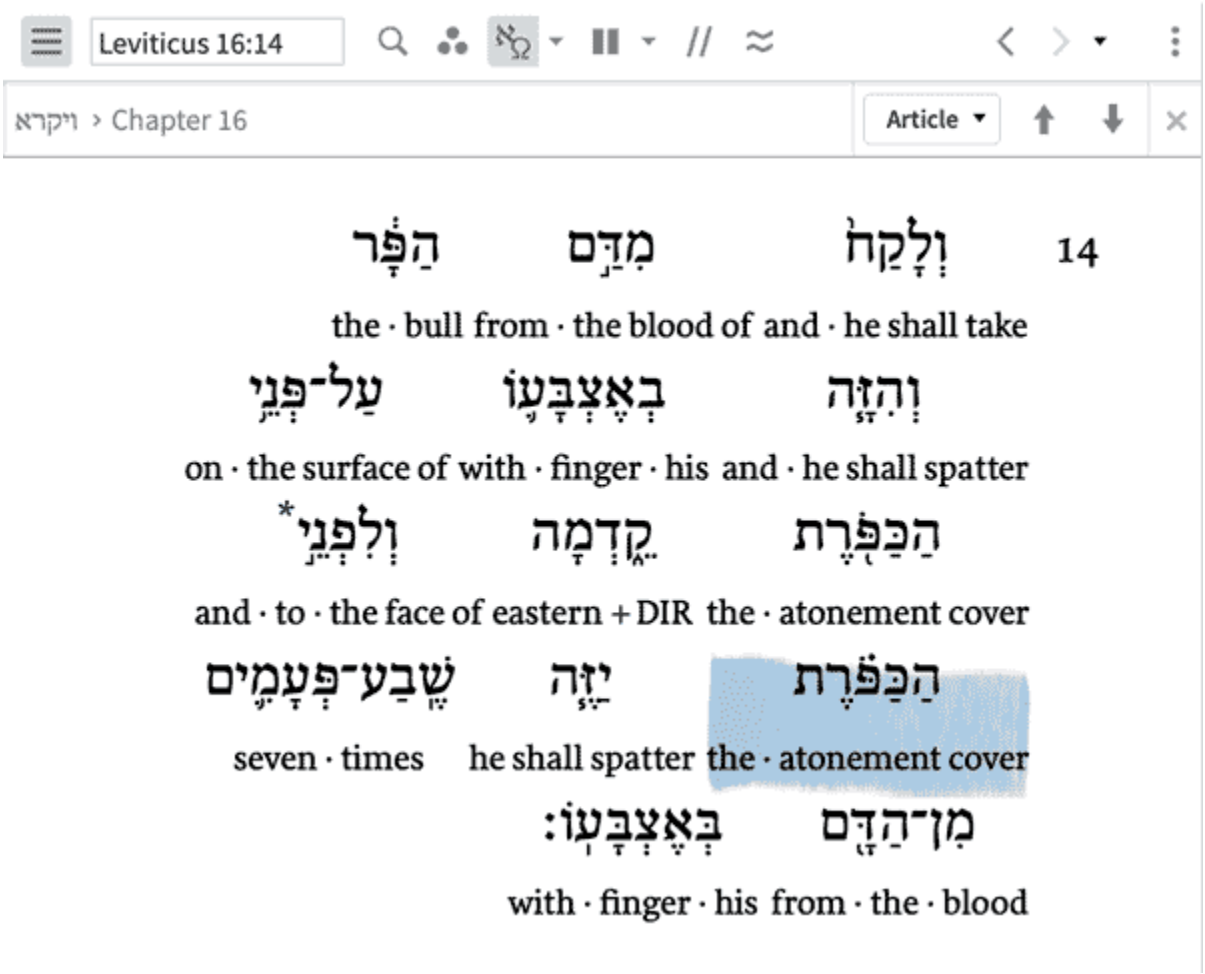
Do you see how important this is? When we receive a picture of God presented in descriptions like "the ultimate darkness of God's wrath" or distilled into words like *propitiation*, we quite naturally, though perhaps subconsciously, want to keep our distance from Him. Here in the West, that dark teaching about God is in our mother's milk so to speak. As a result, it can be very hard to realize just how much it negatively affects our view of Aba God.

By way of testimony, I can only say that as I have unlearned such dark teachings about my Father in Heaven, my desire to be closer to Him has grown. I did not realize it until I looked back, but such dark images of Him made me want to keep my distance even though I knew I was called to intimacy with Him. And isn't that what we see so much of in Christianity today? A struggle to want to be close to Aba?

Keller alludes to this struggle in his quote above, noting the widespread feeling of separation felt by so many Christians. He finds it necessary to reassure us, "*He is there with us, even when we can't feel him at all.*" But God is not keeping distant from us! We are keeping distant from Him – and with the dark view so many of us have been taught to hold about Him, no wonder!

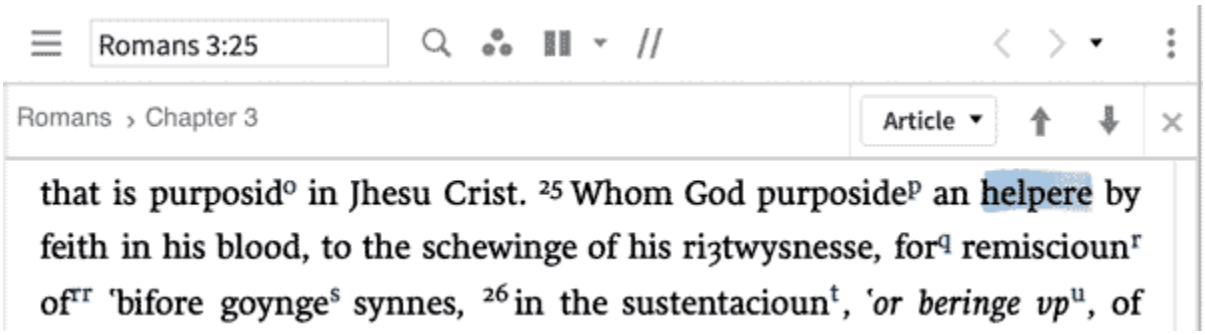
So, wherever you find them, reject the dark images of your Father that have been presented to us by too many Bible teachers and that have even wormed their way into our Bibles. Instead, take heart in the perfect goodness of your Father, Who did not hold back His own Son to win you back to Him.

1. **Leviticus 16.15** (16.14 in the Hebrew Bible) in the original Hebrew. The Hebrew word *kahporet* (כַּפֹּרֶת) is translated *hilasterion* in the Greek Septuagint.



Kaporet (highlighted in blue) in **Leviticus 16.15**.

2. When Wycliff published the first English translation of the Bible in 1382, he did not have the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, he only had the Latin Vulgate. Despite the fact that the Wycliff Bible is a translation of a translation, he wonderfully avoids the propitiation pitfall with the choice of the simple English word helper (helpere):



Romans 3.25 in the Early **Wycliffe** Bible

3. Here is part of the article looking at the meaning of ιλαστηριον from the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (**TDNT** – link requires resource licensing) or "Kittels."

> *"The ἱλάσκομαι contained in ἱλαστήριον naturally does not mean "to propitiate," as though God were an object. This is excluded by the fact that it is God who has made the ἱλαστήριον what it is. In this whole context God is subject, not object. This is in keeping with Paul's doctrine of reconciliation. Only men, or the sins of men, can be object of ἱλάσκομαι. To be sure, we cannot support this statement by Paul's use of ἱλάσκομαι elsewhere, since there is in Paul no other instance of the word or its derivatives. Nevertheless, the statement is incontestable. Furthermore, in Paul's use of the כַּפֹּרֶת conception, the only significant point is that the כַּפֹּרֶת is an atonement for human sin."*

4. Ken Garrison, in his article, **Approaching or Appeasing God?** discusses the use of the word propitiation:

> *"This pagan view of God can be seen in some translations of the New Testament Greek words "hilasterion" (**Romans 3:25**) and "hilasmos" (**1 John 2:2** and **4:10**). Some translators,*

maintaining the pagan view, have chosen the word "propitiate" or "propitiation." Instead, "expiation" or "atoning sacrifice" reflects the nature and character of the God of Israel because He is the Loving God Who is providing a way to approach Him, rather than an angry God Who demands to be appeased."

Introducing the idea of appeasing God into the Bible brings a thoroughly unbiblical, pagan picture of God into translations of the Bible. God is not a taker, Who needs to be mollified like the gods of pagan societies. Molech and Chomesh are two gods mentioned in the Bible that demanded parents to offer their children by burning them alive in order to please or appease these gods. Rubens's painting, **Saturn Devouring His Son**, at the top of the article expresses a similarly pagan – and gruesome – picture of God, yet it is one that we certainly arrive at when we allow the belief that God has a dark side to work its way into our think, and that "dark side" yeast has risen thoroughly in Western Christianity.

Instead of One Who created and redeemed us – both acts of perfect giving – the use of the word *propitiation* presents us with a Being who demands the sacrifice of a perfect victim in order to appease His wrath.