

174 Image is everything

As my image of God has begun to change, the parable of the prodigal father (as I now call it) has become **so** important to me, as has “*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*”¹ Jn 4:18

In early days, I acknowledged the bad image of God created by the “nasty bits” in the Old Testament, but I now feel happy with where I am on that. And having had to wrestle with “wrath”, I’m OK on that too: a loving human father would get angry if someone were harming one of their children – and “wrath” occurs in the New Testament, as well as the Old.

Yesterday, I decided to tackle the references to “propitiation” so I checked my NIV, and that word doesn’t appear! I had a feeling it did, so I went onto Bible Gateway, started typing and got to “propit”, and up came Romans 3:25:

*whom God set forth as a **propitiation** by His blood, through faith,*

But my NIV has:

*God presented him as a **sacrifice of atonement**, through faith in his blood.*

Gateway page shows you the verse in multiple versions: in most it uses “atonement”, in a few it did have “propitiation”, but in a couple it had, for example,

*God publicly displayed him at his death as the **mercy seat** accessible through faith.*

Then I remembered something I had read in a book by NT Wright – several pages of it, but I didn’t really understand it! He talked about the significance of the more literal “mercy-seat”, and how some Bibles translate it as “atonement”, and others “propitiation”.

Clearly, I need to see if I can find where I read that, and **try** to understand it(!), but for now, just let’s think about the image that this verse paints, helped by the OED.

Propitiation – The action of propitiating or appeasing a god, spirit, or person.

Propitiate – Win or regain the favour of (a god, spirit, or person) by doing something that pleases them. (‘the pagans thought it was important to propitiate the gods with sacrifices’)

Atonement – The action of making amends for a wrong or injury.

The Greek words don’t change, so this looks to me like an example where the image of God you start with affects your translation. And then, of course, that translation helps to form the readers’ image of God.

I’m not saying this to criticise the translators. I believe it’s a principle of translation: If you’re not sure of the meaning of the passage, you use (your view of / your group’s view of) the whole tenor of Scripture to point you to a suitable translation.

Here's my feeling about this:

God purely restorative => "atonement" (God draws us back through Jesus' blood)

God partly restorative, partly retributive => "propitiation" (anger is appeased by Jesus' blood)

Personally, I see no retribution in Jesus, so I favour the majority translation.

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