"Hilaskesthai" Revisited

by Roger Nicole

Dr. Norman Young's article on hilaskesthai *in our April-June issue for 1976 attracts the following comment from Dr. Roger Nicole, Professor of Theology in Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts.*

I.

IN the April-June 1976 issue of *The Evangelical Quarterly* Dr. Norman Young has published a very interesting article in which he passes under review certain critics of C. H. Dodd's stand against the idea of propitiation. Dr. Young does me the honour of summarizing some portions of four of the twenty-one arguments I had presented in an article published in 1955.[1] He claims that my contention is weakened by the "unfortunate and incredible linguistic error" of confusing various Semitic roots with identical radicals. It may be appropriate therefore to present here a brief *apologia pro domo sua.*

1. The issue which Dr. Young raises was duly noted in footnote 28 of my article, located on the very page which he criticizes. It reads:

> If it be urged that Dodd may have been of the opinion that there are several roots *kpr* in Hebrew, and that only one of these interests us in the present study, it remains that: 1) Dodd has given no intimation that he held this view, and so he has left himself open to criticism on this score; 2) this opinion would be debatable and the actual distribution of meanings between the various roots highly questionable, in any case; 3) he suggests the contrary in dealing with various renderings of *kōpher* (cf. [*The Bible and the Greeks*], p. 92) as related to the present investigation.

2. On the next page (130) another footnote relates to the words *kephīr* and *kephōr* which have the same radical and which were not included in my earlier statistical assessment, even though I list certain Semitic authorities which indicate some etymological connection with *kipper.* What I did do in my article is to consider in full the words that are adduced by C. H. Dodd himself and on the basis of Hatch and Redpath to provide a full table of all the Septuagint renderings of all of these words. I did not presume to inject at this point a personal opinion as to a variety of Hebrew roots, but felt that the reader was entitled to have the full data before him. This was presented in the form of a tabulation recorded in my article on page 128. On the basis of this table I noted certain translations which were missing in Dodd's presentation, and I listed

[1] R. R. Nicole, "C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation", *Westminster Theological Journal* xvii (1954-55), pp. 117-157.

those under a.-l. on pages 127 and 129. Obviously, if it is judged that some of these forms come from entirely different roots, it would be appropriate to eliminate these particular instances and to adjust the computation accordingly. C. H. Dodd, as my footnote indicates, had not provided any discriminating principle in this respect, and he had dealt with the word *kōpher* in this connection in another part of his article, a fact which certainly constrained me to consider the translations of that word as relevant to the discussion.

3. The explanations that Dr. Young provides are extremely interesting, but it may be noted that in order to eliminate a number of the translations I listed, Dr. Young has to assume that the Septuagint misunderstood or misread the Hebrew in at least two cases; he has to assert that the root *kōpher* "is now generally not related to *kipper*", although Gesenius-Buhl, Brown-Driver-Briggs, König, Köhler-Baumgartner still do relate it in this way, and Dodd himself had viewed it in that light (page 92); he has to set aside *kāphar*, to pitch, although he himself is dubious about a separate rootage in this case.

4. There seems to be two major grounds that may underlie the assertion that identical radicals have diverse Semitic roots.

> (*a*) Comparative Semitic philology provides a concrete basis, by exhibiting actual differences in the radicals in cognate languages.
>
> (*b*) The wide variety of meaning leads one to assume that there is a diversity of roots, even though this is not in fact reflected in a diversity of radicals in any Semitic language, as far as we know.

Those who rely on ground "*b*" (as Dr. Young appears to do, since he does not give a single example from any other Semitic language than Hebrew) must remain open to the possibility that a common root after all does underlie two or more meanings which were at first sight deemed irreducible. The study of the etymology and the semantics of any language is replete with instances where roots and words have taken astonishing turns, unforeseeable to any one, and almost incredible *ex post facto* to those who are not acquainted with the supporting documentation. Caution and restraint should surely characterize assertions in this field when surmise rather than proof must be relied upon.

5. In preparing my article I had the benefit of the counsel of Professors E. J. Young and Samuel A. B. Mercer, and although I and not they must be held responsible for what is found in the article, I imagine that these fine Semitic scholars would have warned me of an "incredible linguistic error" if it were in fact vitiating one of my major contentions. The fact, noted by Dr. Young, that "L. Morris accepts Nicole's arguments apparently oblivious of any linguistic oddity" might perhaps also suggest that the "oddity" is not as serious as Dr. Young imagined.

II

At a later point Dr. Young avers that "Surprisingly, Nicole doesn't mention Isaiah 6: 7" and suggests that I avoided mention of that text because it would turn in favor of Dodd's contention rather than of mine. Anyone who takes the trouble to check the tabulation on page 128 will readily see that Isaiah 6: 7 is duly recorded. Furthermore the language which introduces my listing on pages 127 and 129 makes clear that I proposed to tabulate there translations "*in addition*" to those listed by Dodd. Since Dodd had listed *katharizō*, the translation *perikatharizō* was sufficiently covered, so that another listing was not required.

In any case I doubt that there is anything in my article that warrants the insinuation that I would omit reference to objective data because I did deem them prejudicial to my contention. I was in the process of calling attention to the fact that C. H. Dodd had an incomplete presentation of facts and particularly in this context I would certainly not have wanted to appear to fall myself into the same defect.

III

Dr. Young judges that I am not justified in complaining that Dodd did not take account of LXX passages from Apocryphal books where a Hebrew *Vorlage* is not extant, since these are "unsuitable for Dodd's comparative method" (p. 72). Here is what I had written in my article:

> Indeed for the purpose of comparing Hebrew and Greek these are not helpful, since no Hebrew text is extant. But as a witness to LXX usage these books [Maccabees] must certainly receive consideration (p. 133).

It is Dodd's failure to take account of the whole range of LXX usage which I deemed objectionable. The objection is not removed by pointing to the absence of a Hebrew original, and it is heightened when one considers how Dodd extends to the usage of the New Testament authors what he has claimed to be the usage of the Septuagint. The discussion of Dr. David Hill with respect to a possible relation between 4 Macc. 17: 22 and Rom. 3: 25 (*Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, pp. 41-47) makes clear how grievous and damaging is Dodd's omission at this point.

Dr. Young does not materially help Dodd's case by urging that Dodd claimed that in respect of their use of *hilaskomai* "The LXX (and NT) is an isolated island; unique because the LXX is translating Hebrew and so forced Greek words into a new mould" (p. 72). The parenthesis "and NT" really destroys the force of the argument, since the NT authors, and particularly those who use words of the *hilaskomai* class (Luke, Paul, John, the author of Hebrews), did

not have to translate! Yet Dodd insists on evaluating their probable meaning as falling in line with what he considers the dominant LXX usage. It is furthermore not clear why the same process would not have continued, which it certainly did not, with the Apostolic Fathers and their successors, so the presence of an alleged linguistic island remains highly anomalous.[2]

IV

In the course of one survey article in which he dealt with four different authors, it is quite natural that Dr. Young could not give attention to every argument advanced. In dealing with my own contribution he has given some account of only four out of at least twenty-one lines of criticism which I offered. Naturally I feel that the other seventeen points deserved some attention as well as five concluding remarks of a general order and five basic theses in which I attempted to summarize the whole situation with respect to the biblical outlook on propitiation. Now it is true that Dr. Young mentions in other contexts a number of considerations which I had also included in my discussion. These indeed could be examined with reference to the work of Leon Morris, David Hill or Klaus Koch as well as to mine. Even so a number of important strictures are completely by-passed. Among these, I may be permitted to reassert a major theological argument which I presented under "Conclusions" as follows:

> The substitute renderings suggested by Dodd, "expiate," "purify", are less specific than "propitiate", "placate". Yet sooner or later the question must arise: "Who requires expiation or purification, and why?" If the answer be "God does, in the exercise of his righteousness", we are back to the traditional view, entirely consonant with the carefully avoided term "propitiation". If the answer be "Man does, for the satisfaction of his moral needs", we are faced with a view of salvation which is so greatly at variance with the biblical conception on so many points, that one is truly surprised to see its upholders attempt to harmonize their position with Scripture, or to try to explain away the implications of just one term like *hilaskesthai* (pp. 149, 150).

In my judgment there is no benefit to be reaped by making the change from "propitiation" to "expiation" unless this particular query receives its proper attention.

V

The present article, which has already grown longer than I intended, is limited to a consideration of Dr. Young's treatment of my paper. Obviously, the other three scholars might well wish to

[2] It may be noted that Dodd at the beginning of his article (p. 82) quoted two passages from secular Greek which he deems supportive of his contention, but this reduces further any force to be found in the argument from translation.

register their reaction as well. It is noteworthy that in spite of his obvious desire to endorse and vindicate Dodd, Dr. Young is led to offer some very important qualifications to Dodd's contentions.

Even if Dr. Young is right on all his criticisms of Dodd's critics, it remains that Dodd's thesis is very seriously curtailed. No evidence has been offered to show that Dodd was in fact dealing with complete relevant evidence when charged with incompleteness, nor that his conclusions were in fact warranted by the evidence adduced, when challenged on that score. Notably Dr. Young has done nothing to shore up Dodd's contentions with respect to the NT usage of *hilaskesthai*, an area in which, in my judgment, Dodd categorically affirms what is, on his own showing, merely possible.[3]

It is now more than twenty years since I wrote the original article, and I am eager to state that in the passing of years I have not felt myself constrained to withdraw any of the strictures which I had presented against Dodd in 1955. I have, however, entertained some regret about the tone in which I couched my comments, a tone which led Professor Vincent Taylor, for instance, to characterize my article as "somewhat aggressive".[4] If I were to write on this topic now, I should be careful to manifest a more irenic spirit, even though I would feel no less earnestness in attempting to safeguard the concept of propitiation in what I continue to view as its natural and biblical meaning.

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3 It is interesting to note here an important article by Professor Henri Clavier of Strasbourg, "Note sur un Mot-Clef du Johannisme . . . *HILASMOS*" (*Novum Testamentum*, X/4 (October 1968), 287-304). This paper does not fall to be considered by Dr. Young, since it does not deal with C. H. Dodd, who is mentioned only in terms of his commentaries. Perhaps Dr. Young might find some ammunition here, since Dr. Clavier shuns the whole concept of propitiating God. On the other hand he retains the meaning of "appeasement" and suggests that in the Johannine context it is God who propitiates man! ! This is indeed "standing the root *hilask* on its head"! ! (cf. C. F. D. Moule, *SEA* 30 (1965), 24, as quoted by Young p. 78).

4 *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, 3rd edition (London: Epworth Press, 1958), p. 218.