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Jintae Kim

Liberty University, jkim33@liberty.edu

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THE CONCEPT OF ATONEMENT IN HELLENISTIC THOUGHT
AND 1 JOHN

Jintae Kim

Alliance Theological Seminary, Nyack, New York

The doctrine of atonement is an early Christian belief, but the debate on the roots of this doctrine still continues.¹ In the Gospels, the idea of the sacrificial character of Jesus is attested primarily in the Last Supper narratives (Mt. 26.26-29; Mk 14.22-25; Lk. 22.15-20; cf. Mk 10.45). The concept of the death of Jesus as atonement is more explicitly stated in a few places in the New Testament (Rom. 3.25; 1 Cor. 11.25; 15.3; 1 Pet. 1.18-19; Heb. 2.17; 9.13), but the concept is pronounced most explicitly in 1 John's presentation of the death of Christ as an atoning sacrifice (ἵλασμός in 2.2; 4.10).

The use of peculiar expressions such as ἵλασμός can be seen as evidence for 1 John's usage of the religious phraseology and thought-forms of the Hellenistic world.² This raises the question: Does it mean that 1 John's concept of atonement has its roots in Hellenistic thought? This study will attempt to answer this question.

Four aspects of Christ's role in the forgiveness of sin are described in 1 John: (1) his death as the atoning sacrifice (ἵλασμός in 2.2; 4.10) for the sins of the world; (2) his death as an effective and vicarious self-sacri-

1. M. Hengel, *Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (trans. J. Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 3; K. Wengst, *Christologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: Gütersloh Verlagshaus, 1972), p. 70; S.K. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event: The Background and Origin of a Concept* (HDR, 2; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), pp. 153-61.

2. C.H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), p. xx; G. Strecker, *The Johannine Letters* (trans. L.M. Maloney; ed. H. Attridge; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 30.

fice; (3) his blood as a purificatory agent for all sin (1.7); and (4) his ongoing ministry as an advocate for believers before the Father (2.1).

The correspondences between 1 John and the Hellenistic world are twofold: (1) the use of the term ἱλασμός for an atoning sacrifice; and (2) the death of Christ as an effective self-sacrifice ('He laid down his life for us', in 3.16). With regard to the first correspondence, the term ἱλασμός is found only in 1 John in the New Testament, but it occurs often in Plutarch (*Sol.* 12; *Fab.* 18, 3; *Cam.* 7; *Mor.* 555c, 560d, 972c) in the sense of cultic propitiation of the gods and expiatory action in general.³ With respect to the second correspondence, the concept of self-sacrifice is present in pre-Christian Greco-Roman literature.⁴ This study will examine the six uses of the term ἱλασμός in Plutarch to compare and contrast them to 1 John's presentation of Jesus as the atoning sacrifice.

Use of the Term ἱλασμός in Plutarch

The word ἱλασμός is rarely used in classical Greek literature. Büchsel's search produced a meager result. He could not find the word in the Attic orators, Sophocles, Thucydides, Epictetus, the Orphic fragments, the pre-Socratics or the older Stoics.⁵ My search, however, found two occurrences in Orpheus's *Argonautica* (39, 554) and six occurrences in Plutarch. In Orpheus's *Argonautica*, the word ἱλασμός is used twice with the means of 'propitiation' specified. However, these two occurrences in *Argonautica* are irrelevant to our study because of its late dating. The *Argonautica* attributed to Orpheus is actually a pseudonymous work written in the form of autobiographical narrative, in which Orpheus tells the story of his participation in the expedition led by Jason. Scholars generally agree that Orpheus's *Argonautica* cannot be earlier and may be later than the fourth century AD, and that it is ascribed to Orpheus in order to give it proper dignity.⁶

Thus, we find no known instance of the usage of the word ἱλασμός in pre-Christian, non-Jewish Greek writings. Apart from Jewish writings, such as the LXX and Philo, the six occurrences in Plutarch represent the earliest known usage of ἱλασμός, since his works date back to the New

3. F. Büchsel, 'ἱλασμός', in *TDNT*, III, pp. 310-18 (317).

4. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, pp. 153-61.

5. Büchsel, 'ἱλασμός', p. 317.

6. M.L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 37; W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (London: Methuen, 1935), p. 15.

Testament period. Thus, we will focus on the six passages in Plutarch (AD 45–120). We will first examine these examples, and then compare and contrast the use of the term in 1 John. Of these six examples, two refer to propitiatory rites for ghosts, while four refer to propitiatory rites for angry gods. We will first examine two examples from *Moralia* that deal with propitiatory rites for ghosts.

The Use of the Word ἱλασμός as a Propitiatory Rite for Ghosts

Moralia 555C. The first example comes in Plutarch's discussion of Pausanias, the nephew of the Spartan king Leonidas I, who commanded the allied Greek army that defeated the Persians at Plataea (479) and led the Greeks in the capture of Byzantium (478).⁷ *Moralia* is a collection of Plutarch's surviving writings on ethical, religious, physical, political and literary topics. This amounts to more than 60 essays cast mainly in the form of dialogues or diatribes.⁸ Some of the works included in *Moralia* are no longer accepted as authentic, but the two essays, 'On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance' and 'On the Cleverness of Animals', in which the word ἱλασμός is used, are accepted as authentic. In the former, the word is used twice to refer to the propitiatory rites to appease the dead, and in the latter it is used once to appease an angry god, but the story line follows a similar pattern in all three examples.

The first two examples of the use of ἱλασμός come from Plutarch's dialogue 'On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance'. As indicated in the passages (*Mor.* 552F, 553F, 556F, 560C), the scene of the dialogue is Delphi, where Plutarch was one of the two priests of Apollo.⁹ The speakers in the dialogue are Plutarch, his son-in-law Patrocleas, his brother Timon and Olympichus. According to De Lacy and Einarson, the dialogue may not have been written before AD 81 for two internal reasons: (1) Plutarch is described as a student at Delphi in 66/67 (*Mor.* 385B); and (2) he comments on the prophecy of the Sibyl about the eruption of Vesuvius (August 24-26, 79) and a good 'emperor of those days' who is to leave his throne through sickness (*Mor.* 566E).

7. 'Pausanias', in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998), IX, p. 212.

8. F.W. Walbank, 'Plutarch', in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, IX, pp. 529-30 (529).

9. P. De Lacy and B. Einarson, 'Introduction: On the Delay of the Divine Vengeance', in Plutarch, *Moralia* (ed. G.P. Goold; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), VII, pp. 168-79 (173).

Continuing his argument for the delay of divine vengeance, Plutarch discusses the survival of the human soul, and supports this concept by quoting the story about Pausanias, who had to give certain propitiatory offerings to appease the ghost of Cleonice, whom he killed by mistake:

When Pausanias was at Byzantium, he had in his insolent lust sent for her for the night. As she drew near, he was seized by some wild suspicion and killed her. Thereafter he often saw her in his dreams, saying to him: 'Come meet thy doom; by pride are men undone'. As the apparition did not cease, he sailed (we hear) to the Passage of the Dead at Heracleia and with certain propitiatory rites and libations evoked the maiden's ghost (ἰλασμοῖς τισι καὶ χοαῖς ἀνεκαλεῖτο τὴν ψυχὴν τῆς κόρης); it appeared to him and said that his troubles would be over when he went to Lacedaemon. On going there he presently died. 'And so, if nothing exists for the soul when life is done, and death is the bourne of all reward and punishment...' (*Mor.* 555C, LCL).

What would have been involved in the propitiatory rites to appease the ghosts in Greek popular religion? Plutarch tends not to elaborate on the details of propitiatory rites, and so he does not answer this question. Certain clues may be found in the similarity between the pattern of Pausanias's story and the pattern of the cult of the dead and the netherworld as described in books 10–11 of Homer's *Odyssey*.¹⁰ The pattern of the story in books 10–11 of the *Odyssey* can be divided into three parts: (1) Odysseus finds himself in a desperate situation, having lost eleven of his twelve ships to the cannibalistic Laistrygones. He had angered Poseidon by blinding Polyphemus, the Cyclops, a son of Poseidon, and, due to this, he was wandering hopelessly in the ocean. (2) Odysseus seeks the counsel of the goddess Circe, who advises him to go to the house of Hades and Persephone and offer the propitiatory rites to the dead and to the gods of the netherworld so that he may seek a prophecy from the ghost of Theban Teiresias, the blind seer. (3) After offering the propitiatory rites, Odysseus learns from the ghost of Teiresias about his future journey and how to propitiate Poseidon's wrath (*Od.* 11.100-138).

The story of Pausanias seems to closely follow the pattern found in Homer's *Odyssey*: (1) the occasion of the propitiatory rites is the desperate situation of Pausanias, who was tormented by nightmares about Cleonice, whom he had killed by mistake; (2) he sails to the land of

10. J. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), pp. 74-76.

the dead and evokes the girl's ghost with propitiatory rites and libations; and (3) having been appeased by Pausanias's propitiatory sacrifices, the ghost gives him a prophecy of his future.

Because these stories are so similar, it is probable that the propitiatory rites performed by Pausanias were similar to what is described in the *Odyssey*. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus makes supplication to the glorious tribes of the dead with a libation and the sacrifice of a ram and a black ewe. Prominent in the descriptions of the rites in the *Odyssey* is the use of the blood of the victim. After slaughtering the victims, their blood is poured into the pit, and the ghosts of the dead come forth to drink the blood, while Odysseus offers a sheep as a whole-burnt offering to Hades and Persephone with prayer. According to Nilsson, the prevailing idea in this story is 'that the souls have no consciousness and can acquire this only by drinking the blood of the sacrificial animal, an idea which originates in the blood-offerings poured out upon the grave'.¹¹ Therefore, it can be concluded that in these rites blood is used primarily as food for the dead.

Moralia 560D. The next example of the use of ἱλασμός also comes from Plutarch's dialogue 'On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance', in which Plutarch argues against Olympichus for the survival of the soul:

'Why, do you think', he said, 'that if the gods attend to us and mete out every particular of our lives, it follows that our souls are either altogether imperishable or survive for some time after death?' 'It doesn't follow, my good friend?' I asked. 'Is God instead so petty and so absorbed in trifles that if we had nothing divine in us or in some sort resembling him and enduring and constant, but like leaves, as Homer said, withered quite away and perished after a brief space, he would make so much of us, and like the women who nurse and tend their "gardens of Adonis" in pots of earthenware, would admit no strong root of life, only to be presently extinguished on the slightest occasion? But if you will, leave the other gods aside, and consider whether in your opinion our own god of this place, knowing that when men die their souls perish immediately, exhaled from the body like vapour or smoke, nevertheless prescribes many appeasements of the dead (ἱλασμούς τε πολλοὺς προσφέρειν τῶν κατοιχομένων) and demands for them great honours and consideration, deluding and cheating those who put faith in him' (*Mor.* 560C-D, LCL).

11. M.P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion* (trans. F.J. Fielden; London: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 1949), p. 138.

In this passage, Plutarch reminds Olympichus that Apollo prescribes many propitiatory sacrifices for the dead and demands for them great honors and consideration. In Greek religion, Apollo is the καθάρσιος, the god of purification and expiations, who understands the art of purifying those who are stained.¹² According to Nilsson, ‘It is the rule, even in historical examples, that the hero’s wrath sends disasters, plague, and famine, and that he is appeased according to the instructions of Delphi... The oracle ordained that the dead should be appeased by sumptuous offerings and games.’ Thus, in times of emergency, the seers or the priests serving in the temple of Apollo, such as Calchas (Homer, *Il.* 1.69-101; Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis* 87-93) or Chryses (*Il.* 1.3, 450-474), are often called in to discover the reason for the wrath of ouranian gods or chthonic deities and to suggest and apply the ways of averting it.

Three observations are in order about the expression ἱλασμούς τε πολλούς προσφέρειν: (1) propitiatory sacrifices to the dead were popular in Greek religion in general, as observed by Yerkes:¹³ ‘Propitiatory rites were well known in Greek popular religion for chthonic deities, for malevolent spirits of the underworld and for ghosts of departed ancestors and of ancient heroes’; (2) the use of the verb προσφέρειν indicates that Plutarch is referring to propitiatory sacrifices with the expression ἱλασμοῦς; and (3) the expression ἱλασμούς τε πολλούς indicates that there were many types of propitiatory offerings.

Evaluation. In the foregoing discussion, we have examined the two uses of ἱλασμός for propitiatory rites in Plutarch’s essay ‘On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance’. They correspond with 1 John’s use of ἱλασμός in only one aspect: both use ἱλασμός with reference to a means of atonement.¹⁴

The Use of the Word ἱλασμός as a Propitiatory Sacrifice to Appease an Angry God

Having examined the two uses of ἱλασμός to refer to propitiatory rites for the dead, we now turn to its use for propitiatory rites for angry gods.

12. Büchsel, ‘ἱλασμός’, p. 311; Nilsson, *History of Greek Religion*, pp. 194-95.

13. R.K. Yerkes, *Sacrifice in Greek and Roman Religions and Early Judaism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), p. 53.

14. Hereafter, I will use the term ‘atoning sacrifice’ for ἱλασμός in 1 John, following the NRSV, while following the traditional rendering of ἱλασμός as ‘propitiatory rite’ in secular Greek literature.

We will first examine each usage of ἱλασμός and then compare and contrast them to the concept of atonement in 1 John.

Moralia 972C. The first example to examine in this regard is Plutarch's story about Ptolemy Philopator, a Macedonian king of Egypt (who reigned 221–205 BC). Under his feeble rule, which was heavily influenced by his favored servants, much of Ptolemaic Syria was lost and native uprisings began to disturb the internal stability of Egypt.¹⁵ The story told by Plutarch concerns Ptolemy Philopator's sacrifice of four elephants after his victory over Antiochus's army in the battle near Raphia in southern Palestine:

...when, accordingly, any elephant of a number traveling together falls in, the others bring wood and stones and throw them in to fill up the excavation so that their comrade can easily get out. He also relates that, without any instruction, elephants pray to the gods, purifying themselves in the sea and, when the sun rises, worshipping it by raising their trunks, as if they were hands of supplication. For this reason they are the animal most loved of the gods, as Ptolemy Philopator has testified; for when he had vanquished Antiochus and wished to honour the gods, in a really striking way, among many other offerings to commemorate his victory in battle, he sacrificed four elephants. Thereafter, since he had dreams by night in which the deity angrily threatened him (ὡς τοῦ θεοῦ μετ' ὀργῆς τοῦ ἀπειλοῦντος αὐτῷ) because of that strange sacrifice, he employed many rites of appeasement (ἱλασμοῖς τε πολλοῖς ἐχρήσατο) and set up as a votive offering four bronze elephants to match those he had slaughtered (*Mor.* 972B-C, LCL).

Unlike the case of Pausanias (*Mor.* 555C), the occasion for the propitiatory sacrifices is the anger of a deity caused by the strange sacrifice that Ptolemy Philopator made of the four elephants, the 'most loved of the gods'. Otherwise, the pattern of the event closely resembles the case of Pausanias discussed above.

Solon in Plutarch's Lives. We have just examined the first example of the use of ἱλασμός in relation to an angry god. The second example to examine in this regard is from the story of Solon in Plutarch's *Lives*. Solon (630–560 BC) was an Athenian statesman who was known as one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece who 'ended exclusive aristocratic control of the government, substituted a system of control by the wealthy,

15. 'Ptolemy IV Philopator', in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, IX, p. 773.

and introduced a new and more humane law code'.¹⁶ The passage discussed in this section is related to Solon's introduction of the new law code:

Now the Cylonian pollution had for a long time agitated the city, ever since Megacles the archon had persuaded Cylon and his fellow-conspirators, who had taken sanctuary in the temple of Athena, to come down and stand their trial. They fastened a braided thread to the image of the goddess and kept hold of it, but when they reached the shrine of the Erinyes on their way down, the thread broke of its own accord, upon which Megacles and his fellow-archons rushed to seize them, on the plea that the goddess refused them the rights of suppliants. Those who were outside of sacred precincts were stoned to death, and those who took refuge at the altars were slaughtered there; only those were spared who made supplication to the wives of the archons. Therefore the archons were called polluted men and were held in execration... The city was also visited with superstitious fears and strange appearances, and the seers declared that their sacrifices indicated pollutions and defilements which demanded expiation (καθαρω̄ν). Under these circumstances they summoned to their aid from Crete Epimenides of Phaestus, who is reckoned as the seventh Wise Man by some of those who refuse Periander a place in the list. He was reputed to be a man beloved of the gods, and endowed with a mystical and heaven-sent wisdom in religious matters... For he made the Athenians decorous and careful in their religious services, and milder in their rites of mourning, by attaching certain sacrifices immediately to their funeral ceremonies, and by taking away the harsh and barbaric practices in which their women had usually indulged up to that time. Most important of all, by sundry rites of propitiation (ἰλασμοῖς) and purification (καθαρμοῖς), and by sacred foundations, he hallowed and consecrated the city, and brought it to be observant of justice and more easily inclined to unanimity (*Sol.* 12, LCL).

From this passage, we find all the important features of the propitiatory sacrifices of ancient Greece: (1) the occasion of the propitiatory sacrifices is the visitation of a pestilence and ill omens upon the city of Athens presumably because of the sacrilege committed by Cylon; (2) the priest interprets the situation as one that needs expiation (καθαρω̄ν); (3) in this time of emergency, the Athenians summon Epimenides of Crete, who possesses knowledge in all the supernatural and ritual parts of their religion, to tell them the reason for the divine wrath and the ways of averting it; and (4) Epimenides purifies and consecrates the city with public rites of propitiation (ἰλασμοῖς) and purification (καθαρμοῖς). The

16. 'Solon', in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, X, pp. 951-52 (951).

two kinds of sacrifices are mentioned separately in the chapter. This supports Strecker's argument that 'in the pre-Christian Greek world a distinction was made between καθαρμοί (purifying sacrifices) and ἱλασμοί (atoning sacrifices)'.¹⁷ The same distinction can be observed in Orpheus's *Argonautica*: 'And you have learned the ways of divination by beasts...the purification rite (καθαρμόν), great blessing to men, placations of gods (ἱλασμούς τε θεῶν), and gifts poured out for the dead' (ll. 33-39).¹⁸

From our examination of the four passages that use the word ἱλασμός, we may conclude that they all describe a similar pattern of events, as exemplified in *Solon*. In *Solon*, we observe a pattern of propitiatory sacrifices that is very similar to the event recorded at the beginning of the *Iliad*: (1) the occasion of the propitiatory sacrifices is the calamity of pestilence that falls upon the host of Hellas:

Who then of the gods was it that brought these two together to contend? The son of Leto and Zeus; for he in wrath against the king roused throughout the host an evil pestilence, and the folk were perishing... The mules he assailed first and the swift dogs, but thereafter on the men themselves he let fly his stinging arrows, and smote; and did the pyres of the dead burn thick... Then the folk began to die thick and fast, and the shafts of the god ranged everywhere throughout the wide camp of the Achaeans (Homer, *Il.* 1.9-10, 50-53, 382-384, LCL).

(2) In this time of crisis, Achilles, inspired by the goddess Hera, calls the host of Hellas to the place of gathering and suggests to them that they ask some seer or priest the cause of Apollo's wrath (Homer, *Il.* 1.54-67).

(3) To this inquiry, Calchas the seer communicates an oracle to the host of Hellas, which states that it is because of the priest Chryses, whom Agamemnon dishonored by neither releasing his daughter nor accepting the ransom that Chryses paid for her, and advises them to give her back to her father Chryses and lead a sacred hecatomb to him in order to propitiate (ἱλασσάμενοι) the wrath of Apollo (Homer, *Il.* 1.92-100).¹⁹

17. Strecker, *Johannine Letters*, p. 30 n. 24.

18. The English translation of Orpheus's *Argonautica* is by West, *Orphic Poems*. The Greek text of the work is quoted from Schneider's version, *Orpheus, Argonautica* (ed. J.G. Schneider; Jenae: Sumtibus suis F. Fromann, 1803).

19. The word ἑκατόμβη that literally means 100 oxen refers to a great or costly sacrifice or the material for such a sacrifice. See R.J. Cunliffe, *Lexicon of the Homeric*

The description of Calchas in the *Iliad* clearly resembles that of Epimenides of Crete. Calchas is called to be ‘far the best of diviners, who had knowledge of all things that were, and that were to be, and that had been before, and who had guided the ships of the Achaeans to Ilios by his soothsaying that Phoebus Apollo had bestowed upon him’ (Homer, *Il.* 1.69-72, LCL).

(4) The propitiatory rites that the Greeks perform are divided into two parts. The first rite is the purification of the host: ‘The son of Atreus bade the host to purify (ἀπολυμαίνεσθαι) itself. And they purified themselves (ἀπολυμαίνοντο), and cast the defilement into the sea, and offered to Apollo acceptable hecatombs of bulls and goats by the shore of the unresting sea; and the savour thereof went up to heaven, eddying amid the smoke’ (Homer, *Il.* 1.308-317). The second rite is performed by Chryses, the priest of Apollo, whose daughter was brought to him by Odysseus along with the holy hecatomb, in order that they might make propitiation (ἱλασόμεσθα) to Apollo, who had brought woes and lamentation upon the host of Hellas (*Il.* 440-445). The propitiatory rite is described in detail in the *Iliad*. It begins with the prayer of the priest, who then sprinkles the barley grains, slaughters the victims and offers choice parts of the victims as burnt offering and pours wine as a libation offering, which is followed by a joyous meal with music and dancing. In addition, the Greek youths who attend the service seek to appease (ἱλάσκοντο) the god by offering a beautiful paean and hymns (*Il.* 400-474).

Thus, Plutarch closely follows a traditional pattern of propitiatory rites. The propitiatory rites performed by Epimenides may have included various cultic acts such as prayers, sacrifices, purifications, dances and games.²⁰ Compared to the description of the rites in the *Iliad*, Plutarch is distinctive in his use of the noun ἱλασμός to refer to the propitiatory rites, the concept of which is expressed by the verbs ἱλασόμεαι (1.445) and ἱλασκόμαι (1.474) in the *Iliad*. It seems that the noun form ἱλασμός is a late phenomenon.

Fabius Maximus and Camillus. The two other examples of the use of ἱλασμός in Plutarch’s *Lives* are found in the events that happened in Rome: (1) the story about Fabius Maximus (d. 203 BC) and (2) the story

Dialect (London: Blackie & Son, 1924), p. 118; and W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (trans. J. Raffan; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985 [1977]), p. 18.

20. Büchsel, ‘ἱλασμός’.

about Camillus, a Roman soldier and statesman, who was honored after the sack of Rome by the Gauls (c. 390 BC) as the second founder of the city.²¹ According to Yerkes, ‘the purpose of all Roman religious rites was the propitiation, that is, retaining the favor, of friendly powers and the aversion of hostile powers’.²² Thus, both examples of the use of word ἱλασμός in the Roman period emphasize the necessity of propitiatory sacrifices in the event of public misfortune and calamity.

Fabius Maximus was a Roman commander and statesman whose cautious delaying tactics during the early stages of the Second Punic War helped lead Rome to an eventual victory (218–201 BC).²³ The story runs like this:

Accordingly, he put guards at the gates, in order to keep the frightened throng from abandoning the city, and set limits of time and place to the mourning for the dead, ordering any who wished to indulge in lamentation, to do so at home for a period of thirty days; after that, all mourning must cease and the city be purified of such rites. And since the festival of Ceres fell within these days, it was deemed better to remit entirely the sacrifices (θυσίας) and the procession, rather than to emphasize the magnitude of their calamity by the small number and the dejection of the participants. For the gods’ delight is in honours paid them by the fortunate. However, all the rites which the augurs advocated for the propitiation of the gods (πρὸς ἱλασμοῦς θεῶν), or to avert inauspicious omens, were duly performed (Plutarch, *Fab.* 18.1-3, LCL).

The occasion of the propitiatory sacrifices in the passage is the public misfortune and calamity of the defeat of Rome by Hannibal’s army. In this time of crisis, the augurs seem to interpret the event as caused by the wrath of the gods, which needs to be propitiated. Fabius allows the rites to be performed. What these rites may have entailed is described by Yerkes:

The chief element of all these rites was the ceremonial preparation and the slaughter of the victim, the examination of the exta, and the burning of these exta upon the altar, the whole rite being conducted in strict silence, except for the strains of pipers whose business was to drown any unlucky sound which might mar the sacrifice. Until the burning of the exta the victims were wholly sacra or taboo. After the ceremony had been completed

21. ‘Camillus, Marcus Furius’, in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, II, p. 769.

22. Yerkes, *Sacrifice*, p. 58.

23. ‘Fabius Maximus Cunctator, Quintus’, in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, IV, p. 648.

they seem to have lost their holiness; they became the property of the priests.²⁴

The story of Camillo is slightly different from that of Fabius with respect to the occasion of the offerings:

Whether it was due to the magnitude of his exploit in taking a city which could vie with Rome and endure a siege of ten years, or to the congratulations showered upon him, Camillus was lifted up to vanity, cherished thoughts far from becoming to a civil magistrate subject to the law, and celebrated a triumph with great pomp: he actually had four white horses harnessed to a chariot on which he mounted and drove through Rome, a thing which no commander had ever done before or afterwards did. For they thought such a car sacred and devoted to the king and father of the gods. In this way he incurred the enmity of the citizens, who were not accustomed to wanton extravagance. They had also a second grievance against him in that he opposed himself to a law dividing the city... But the strongest and most apparent reason why the multitude hated him was based on the matter of the tenth of the spoil of Veii, and herein they had a plausible, though not a very just ground of complaint. He had vowed, as it seems, on setting out against Veii, that if he should take the city, he would consecrate the tenth of its booty to the Delphian god...he as good as forgot his vow. At a later time, when he had laid down his command, he referred the matter to the Senate, and the seers announced tokens in their sacrifices that the gods were angry, and must be propitiated with due offerings (ἱλασμοῦ καὶ χαριστηρίων δεομένην) (Plutarch, *Cam.* 7, LCL).

The occasion for offering the propitiatory sacrifices is the public hatred of Camillo for the offenses committed by him in three areas: his exaltation to vanity, his opposition to a law dividing the city, thus depriving the people of the opportunity to become richer, and his negligence in keeping the vow made to the Delphian god.

Atonement in Plutarch and 1 John

In the foregoing discussion, we have examined the four uses of ἱλασμός with reference to propitiatory sacrifices in Plutarch. We will now compare them with and contrast them to the concept of atonement in 1 John.

There are two verbal and conceptual correspondences between 1 John and Plutarch. First, both employ the term ἱλασμός in referring to a means of atonement (1 Jn 2.2; 4.10). Secondly, the idea of cleansing

24. Yerkes, *Sacrifice*, p. 58.

(καθαρμοῖς) by sacrifice in *Solon* corresponds to the concept that the blood of Jesus, ἰλασμός, cleanses (καθαρίζει) us from all sin (1 Jn 1.7).

The two terms, *propitiation* (ἰλασμοῖς) and *purification* (καθαρμοῖς), are used together in *Solon*. The question is, How was the purification done? Plutarch does not answer this question, but there is indirect evidence that Epimenides used the sacrifice of human blood in purifying the city of Attica after the Cylonian pollution. Athenaeus reports the same event as described in *Solon* 12 by Plutarch: ‘Notorious are also the things that happened in the case of Cratinus of Athens; for he was a handsome lad at the time when Epimenides was purifying Attica by the sacrifice of human blood, because of some ancient acts of abomination’ (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 13.602C, LCL). Athenaeus was a Greek grammarian, who flourished around AD 200.²⁵ Therefore, he is obviously using an ancient source here, but none of the extant sources reporting the same event quoted in *Solon* mentions the use of human blood in the purification made by Epimenides (cf. Diogenes Laertius, 1.110; Herodotus, *Hist.* 5.71; Thucydides, *Hist.* 1.126; Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 1).

Moreover, it is not entirely clear whether or not blood was used as a purifying agent in Greek religions. McCarthy examines the ritual uses of blood in Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Greece, Palestine and Arabia, and finds little evidence that blood was considered to be purificatory outside of the Hebrew practices.²⁶ With regard to Greek religious practice, McCarthy concludes:

...ordinary Greek sacrifice did not bother about the blood. It did not belong to the gods. Men ate it, e.g., *Odyssey* xviii, 44-49, and we know this attitude aroused revulsion among Jews later. Most important, the cult of the dead and the netherworld did stress blood... The oldest evidence is *Odyssey* x-xi, where the ‘strengthless dead’ attain a semblance of life by drinking blood from the offerings, but all remains brooding and sinister (contrast *Iliad* xxiii, 34: ‘Everywhere about the body blood ran by the cupful’, which is merely an expression of Achilles’ heroic bounty at Patroclus’ funeral feast). This sinister aspect of the ritual use of blood appears in the very vocabulary of Greek. In the Boeotian dialect death rites

25. ‘Athenaeus’, in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, I, p. 667.

26. D.J. McCarthy, ‘The Symbolism of Blood and Sacrifice’, *JBL* 88 (1969), pp. 166-76.

were called ‘pourings of blood’ (αἱμακουρίαι) but in standard Greek ἐναγίσματα, a noun built on the phrase, ἐν ᾧγει ‘under a curse’.²⁷

Evidence for the purificatory use of blood in Greek religion is for the most part indirect. In addition to Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 13.602C), evidence of this usage comes from the classical period.²⁸ The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (540–480 BC) criticizes the religious practice of his day in which blood was used in purificatory rites: ‘Tainted souls who try to purify themselves with blood (καθαίρονται δὲ αἷματι) are like the man who steps in filth and thinks to bathe in sewage’ (frag. 129 [Diels, 78]).²⁹

However, the fact that we have evidence for the use of blood as a cleansing agent in Greek religion does not automatically lead to the conclusion that the Greek religious practice forms the background of 1 John’s statement regarding the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus (1.7). In Heraclitus’s fragments, there are many statements expressing his aversion to the use of blood in religious rites:

Initiation, here, into the ancient mysteries so honored among men mocks holiness.

They raise their voices at stone idols as a man might argue with his doorpost, they have understood so little of the gods.

Dionysus is their name for death. And if they did not claim the statue of the drunk they worshipped was a god, or call their incoherent song about his cock their hymn, everyone would know what filth their shamelessness has made of them and of the name of god.

A sacred ritual may be performed by one entirely purified but seldom. Other rites belong to those confined in the sodden lumber of the body. (frags. 125-128)

Such critical attitudes towards popular religious rites as expressed by Heraclitus become more evident in the Roman period. According to Yerkes, ‘Genuine blood rites never left enough impression to be noticed or given attempted explanation by Roman writers’.³⁰ In fact, Roman religion is markedly different from Greek religion in the almost complete disappearance of the use of blood in its religious rites. Thus, it is unlikely

27 McCarthy, ‘Symbolism of Blood and Sacrifice’, pp. 170, 172.

28. J. Behm, ‘αἷμα’, in *TDNT*, I, pp. 172-77 (176).

29. The Greek text of the *Fragments* of Heraclitus and its English translation are taken from Haxton’s edition, in Heraclitus of Ephesus, *Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus* (trans. B. Haxton; New York: Viking, 2001), p. 87.

30. Yerkes, *Sacrifice*, pp. 57-58.

that the author of 1 John has Greek blood-rites in mind when he says, 'The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin' (1.7). As pointed out by McCarthy, blood was used primarily as food for the dead in Greek propitiatory rites, and this use of blood is fundamentally different from the concept that Christ's blood has power that cleanses the believers from all sin (1 Jn 1.7).

In contrasting the concept of atonement in 1 John and Plutarch, we find fundamental differences between Jesus Christ as ἱλασμός in 1 John and ἱλασμός in *Solon*. First, the occasion of Christ's atoning sacrifice (ἱλασμός) is not a particular crime or an omen, as in *Solon* and the three other examples. Rather, it is the universal atonement for all human sins: 'And he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world' (2.2).³¹

Secondly, two ideas in 1 John are totally missing in Plutarch's use of the term ἱλασμός: (1) according to 1 John, the motive and the means of atonement are expressed as the loving God sending his own Son as the atoning sacrifice for the salvation of the world: 'In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 Jn 4.10); and (2) Christ is called the savior of the world in his role as a voluntary and vicarious sacrifice for the sins of the world (3.16; 4.10, 14).

Thirdly, in 1 John, Jesus plays the role of an advocate (παράκλητος) for believers before the Father (2.1), besides being the ἱλασμός (2.2). The use of the word παράκλητος in reference to human relationships with gods is not attested in pre-Christian non-Jewish literature.³² The term παράκλητος, which is used once in 1 John (2.1) and five times in the Gospel of John, is used to mean 'supporter' or 'sponsor' in pre-Christian and extra-Christian Greek and Latin literature. This meaning suits the use of παράκλητος in 1 John well.³³ Grayston examines all the occurrences of the word παράκλητος and concludes that the word is used few times in non-Jewish literature to mean 'supporter' or 'sponsor' (Demosthenes, *Fals. Leg.* 1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 11.37; Heraclitus Stoicus, *All.* 59, p. 80, 19).

In 1 John, the word παράκλητος is used in the context of divine-human relations with regard to the forgiveness of sins. As we observed,

31. Hengel, *Atonement*, p. 31.

32. K. Grayston, 'The Meaning of Parakletos', *JSNT* 13 (1981), pp. 67-82 (67-72).

33. Grayston, 'The Meaning of Parakletos', p. 67.

the word παράκλητος is never used in the context of divine-human relations in the non-Jewish Greco-Roman parallels. The word is used most frequently by Philo, who uses it both with reference to an advocate in the context of the royal household (*Flacc.* 13, 22, 151, 181; *Jos.* 222-231, 238-240) and in divine-human relations (*Praem. Poen.* 166-167; *Spec. Leg.* 1.237; *Vit. Mos.* 2.133).

Fourthly, in 1 John, Jesus Christ is called both ἰλασμός and παράκλητος, which do not appear together in any Greco-Roman writings before the third century AD. In contrast to the non-Jewish writings, we find the combination of the concept of atoning sacrifice with the concept of an intercessory role applied to the Servant in Isaiah 53 (53.12) and in early Jewish traditions (*Sifre* on Num. 25.13; *b. Shab.* 89b; *Sifra*, Megora 3.3). Of particular importance to us is a Tannaitic tradition (*Sifre* on Num. 25.13) that applies Isa. 53.12 to Phinehas, Aaron's grandson. It interprets Num. 25.13 to mean, "Because he hath put out his soul unto death" ... for until this present time hath he not ceased (to do so), but he stands and atones, until the time shall come when the dead will live again'.³⁴ Like the picture of Christ in 1 Jn 2.1-2, Phinehas in the *Sifre* has not only accomplished atonement for the sins of the Israelites at Baal Peor, but still stands and makes atonement for their sins as an intercessor.

In the foregoing discussions, we examined the examples of the use of ἰλασμός in Plutarch, and compared them with the concept of atonement in 1 John. We demonstrated that the verbal and conceptual correspondences that exist are purely superficial and that there are fundamental differences between the two.

The correspondences are limited to the use of the same Greek word ἰλασμός in association with propitiatory sacrifice. The differences between Plutarch's and 1 John's use of the term ἰλασμός clearly outweigh these correspondences, making any seeming connection between them invalid. Furthermore, ἰλασμός is used in non-Jewish literature almost exclusively by one particular author, whereas the word is used very frequently in the LXX and Philo in association with the cultic expiation by which sin is made ineffective (Lev. 25.9; Num. 5.8; Amos 8.14; Ps. 129.4; Ezek. 44.27; 2 Macc. 3.33; Philo, *Leg. All.* 3.174; *Poster. C.* 48; *Plant.* 61; *Heir* 179; *Congr.* 89, 107; cf. ἐξιλασμοῦς in Exod. 30.10;

34. The English translation of *Sifre Numbers* is taken from Levertoff's edition: Paul P. Levertoff (trans.), *Midrash Sifre on Numbers: Selections from Early Rabbinic Scriptural Interpretations* (New York: Macmillan, 1926).

Lev. 23.27, 28; 1 Chron. 28.11; Ezek. 43.23; 45.19; Sir. 5.5; 16.11; 17.29; 18.12, 20; 35.3; 1 Esd. 9.20; 2 Macc. 12.45; Wis. 18.21). Such a relatively high frequency of usage in the Jewish sources considerably increases the probability that 1 John depends upon Jewish sources rather than non-Jewish sources. This probability is considerably increased by the fact that 1 John's use of the term παράκλητος in the context of divine-human relations with respect to the forgiveness of sin has its contemporary parallels only in Jewish writings. Therefore, we conclude that it is not likely that 1 John depends upon non-Christian Greek sources in his use of the term ἰλασμός for Christ's role in the forgiveness of sin.