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THE VOCABULARY OF ATONEMENT I

REDEMPTION

by Leon Morris

The Bible writers employed a wide variety of terms to bring out the meaning of atonement. Quite often these terms were well-known from their secular usage, but because we do not have the same secular structure of society we are apt to miss the point. We use these terms in an ecclesiastical setting and give them a conventional meaning. One result

is that we do not put much difference in meaning between such concepts as redemption, deliverance, and reconciliation. When we employ these terms we have the cross of Christ in the back of our minds and this tends to dominate the whole. We think of the cross as the way in which God wrought atonement, and we give these concepts meaning

according to our general understanding of the cross. There is something to be said for this because the cross is the touchstone. It is the cross that gives full meaning to all these concepts. And it is true that the cross must be understood in its own light, and not in the light of other ways of atonement as men understood them. Nevertheless it is true that the Bible writers employed picture words, words which were vivid and luminous to them, words which were well known because of their use. We impoverish our understanding unless we see what they meant by these words. In this series the attempt is being made to see what the words used by the Bible writers meant as they used them, and to see accordingly whether we can deepen our understanding of the atonement. We begin with redemption.

The basic idea in redemption is that of release upon payment of a price. This is expressed in the very formation of the word group. The basic word is *lutron*, 'ransom'. This is derived from *luo*, 'to loose'. *Luo* was used for loosing of various kinds, the loosing of garments, the loosing of harness from an animal, the loosing of armour. It was also used for the loosing of prisoners. This might be done by payment of a price, a ransom, and this ransom price is what *lutron* means. The *-tron*¹ suffix denotes basically the means whereby the action of the corresponding verb is carried out. For example, an implement like *arotron*, 'a plough'. A secondary usage was to signify the place where the action was performed, as *theatron*, 'a place for seeing', 'a theatre'. In the third stage of development this suffix is

employed of the payment made to bring about the action. Thus we get (in the plural) *ta didaktra*, 'the wages for teaching', 'the teacher's fee'. *Lutron*, a late word, is one of this third class. It denotes the payment which secures the action of the verb, i.e. a payment for loosing. Then when from *lutron* a new verb is formed *lutroo*, this verb by its structure means 'to loose on receipt of a price' in distinction from (*luo*), 'to loose'. The more general verb continued in use and might still denote the loosing of prisoners. But *lutroo* was a more precise and exact way to indicate release when a price was paid. Other words were formed on this stem. Thus we find *lutrosis*, and a series of compounds, especially those with *apo* and *ek*. Common to all is the price-paying idea. Throughout the whole range of Greek literature (outside the Bible) there is no question but that these words point us stubbornly to the conception of release when a price is paid.²

The basic application of the word was that to prisoners-of-war. When they went to war the men of ancient times lacked the refinements of modern civilization like atom bombs, mass starvation, poison gas, and the like, but in their own humble fashion they did what they could to make life unpleasant for each other. Among their happy little customs was that when the battle was over the victors took home as many of the vanquished as they could to act as slaves. But when they looked them over they sometimes found that among their captives were men of rank, men of importance in their own community, but who by their upbringing and

position were not well fitted for the manual labour which was the common lot of slaves. Thus they let it be known back in the home country that they were ready to release such-and-such captives, always of course on receipt of a consideration. Then the money would be found and the captives 'redeemed', bought out of their captivity, restored to their rightful place among their brethren. Or the term might be applied to the manumission of slaves. A slave was sometimes permitted to buy his freedom, perhaps by the process of fictitious purchase by a god³. Under this procedure he would pay into the temple treasury of some god the money he had laboriously amassed through years of hard saving. Then his master would go through the solemn rigmarole of selling the slave to the god 'for freedom'. This latter expression would indicate that he was not being bought by the god as one of the temple drudges. He was a free man. Technically he was the slave of the god, and a few pious obligations might well be laid upon him. But as far as men were concerned he was free.

A third form of redemption is to be discerned among the Hebrews. In addition to redemption from captivity they sometimes allowed redemption from a death sentence. Thus the firstborn all belonged to Yahweh and should be offered in sacrifice. But provision was made for them to be redeemed. A sum of money was paid and they were free. Another interesting example of redemption is described in Exodus 21. A man who owned an ox known to be dangerous was required to keep it

safely locked up. If he were careless and the animal got out and gored someone so that the person died, the law was 'the ox shall be stoned, and his owner also shall be put to death' (Ex. 21. 29). But this is not a case of wilful murder. There is no malice aforethought, no evil intent. Thus provision is made for a 'ransom to be 'laid on him'. That is to say, the man was permitted to pay a price, on consideration of which he was released from the death sentence. These are the principal examples of redemption. Of course things as well as people might be redeemed, but our concern is not with them. Where people are concerned the usage of antiquity is clear. The redemption terminology is applied when people are released by payment of a price, from either a state of captivity or a death sentence. I do not know of any example of these words to denote release simply. There is always the thought of a price that is paid. That is what characterizes redemption. That is what distinguishes it from other forms of release.

THE LORD'S REDEMPTION

There is a somewhat different use of our concept in some Old Testament passages, namely, those where the subject is YHWH. We cannot think of the Lord as paying a price for redemption, and indeed sometimes the scripture expressly excludes this possibility. Thus we read 'For thus saith the Lord, ye were sold for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money' (Is. 52. 3). Where the Lord is the subject it is clear that the emphasis will always lie on the fact of deliverance. It is not sur-

prising, accordingly, that many scholars have concluded that in the Septuagint the *lutron* word group has been completely transformed. Whatever may be the case elsewhere, they say, in the Old Testament redemption is without price.⁴ Plainly something can be said for this. If there are demonstrably passages where redemption is spoken of and no price is mentioned, then usage in the Septuagint is not quite the same as that that we see elsewhere. Yet the matter is not simple. Certainly it is not nearly as simple as some writers would have us believe. In the first place, we ought not to overlook the fact that there is no example in the Septuagint of the use of any of the redemption words with a human subject without an express mention or clear implication of the payment of price. This in itself is sufficient to show that the basic meaning of the word group remains. Any new force arises not because the words themselves have been transformed in meaning, but because any word must needs be understood differently when it is applied to Yahweh. For example, we sometimes speak of 'the wrath of God'. But we cannot think that the divine wrath is exactly the same as our wrath. With us wrath always has elements of lack of self-control, or irrationality and the like, which we cannot ascribe to God. But when we use the term 'wrath' we supply without hesitation the necessary mental qualifications. We mean in God wrath in its purest form, a purer form than any we ever see on earth. So it is with love. No-one will maintain that human love, even at its best, is the same thing as divine

love. But we use the same word to describe both because we supply the necessary mental corrections when we speak of the Lord. So with redemption. The redemption words themselves have not acquired a new meaning. But, like other terms, when applied to YHWH they cannot mean exactly the same as when applied to man. The new content comes from the association with YHWH and not from any change of meaning in the words themselves.

Then we should notice a second point about the way the words are used of the Lord. While redemption is ascribed to Him with some frequency, two deliverances are specially described in this fashion, namely, the exodus and the deliverance from the exile. And in both these cases there is a very frequent mention of the Lord putting forth a mighty effort to deliver His people. There are other passages in the Old Testament when all the might of the nations is thought of as insignificant alongside the Lord. The nations are compared to 'a drop of a bucket'. they 'are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing' (Is. 40. 15). But when the Old Testament writers have this aspect of YHWH's dealings with men in mind they do not use the redemption terminology. Redemption apparently was not the right word to apply to a deliverance accomplished with effortless ease. Rather they use it to express the thought that the Lord, because He loves His people, puts forth His great power to save them. He delivers at cost to Himself. So we come across passages like this, 'I will redeem you

with a stretched out arm, and with great judgements' (Ex. 6. 6; cf. also Dt. 9. 26; Ps. 77. 14f. etc.). Such passages indicate that while the redemption terminology is not being used strictly of a literal transaction, yet the words have not been robbed of their force. Redemption is used when the writers want to express the thought that YHWH delivers at cost. Indeed, sometimes they go so far as to mention a price, in this way showing that the significance of the word group is not out of mind. Thus we read, 'I have given Egypt as thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee . . . therefore will I give men for thee, and peoples for thy life' (Is. 43. 3f.).

Thus the usage of the Septuagint when examined closely agrees with that we have seen elsewhere. Redemption is not used here any more than in any other place of simple deliverance. It means deliverance at cost, deliverance on payment of a price.⁵ The word group has a specialized meaning. Applied to the work of Yahweh there will necessarily be some modifications. But these modifications are not such as to eviscerate the word group of its meaning. The price-paying idea is never really lost sight of.

REDEMPTION AND JUDAISM

Between the two Testaments the redemption terminology generally speaking was maintained in the same way. One important new development was its use for the Messianic deliverance. As they were oppressed by their conquerors, the Jews looked forward to the glorious day of release. God would send His Messiah and

set them free. They were in the habit of referring to the deliverance from Egypt and to that from Babylon as 'redemption'. So, naturally enough, they applied this same terminology to the future deliverance. There are many examples of the redemption terminology to describe the coming of the Messiah. The idea of price is by no means always explicit, but this is quite natural. No-one knew how the future deliverance would take place, and there was less scope accordingly for saying things like 'The Lord hath made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations'. But the association of redemption with the Messiah is important. It cannot fail to have had some influence on Christian terminology.

REDEMPTION AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

We have seen that redemption is used to denote a deliverance on payment of price, whether that deliverance be a deliverance from captivity, from slavery, or from a death sentence. Always in the ancient world redemption pointed to one or other of these. Always there is the thought of a serious plight and always there is the thought of a payment which delivers from this plight.

Christians regarded men as being in serious case indeed. Because they were sinners, they were slaves, for did not Jesus say 'everyone who commits sin is a slave' (Jn. 8. 34)? And Paul could write 'sin pays a wage, and the wage is death' (Rom. 6. 23). The creation story of Genesis shows that for which man was made. It pictures man living in unclouded

fellowship with God. But the entrance of sin altered all that. It made man a slave. It brought him under sentence of death. We have exactly the situation that the ancient world thought of as requiring ransom. And it is not surprising accordingly that one of the ways in which the New Testament writers view the cross is that of the paying of a ransom price, the effecting of redemption.

Our Lord Himself uses *lutron* for this when He tells us that 'the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to surrender his life as a ransom for many' (Mk. 10. 45; cf. also Mt. 20. 28). The compound *antilutron* (1 Tim. 2. 6) drives home the same point. If there is any difference between this word and *lutron*, it is that the idea of substitution is reinforced by the preposition. Jesus gives His life in place of the many.

The verb *lutroo* is used in the normal Jewish fashion in Lk. 24. 21, and of Christ's death for us in Tit. 2. 14, 1 Pet. 1. 18f. In both these passages the price that is paid is specifically mentioned. In the former Christ 'gave himself'; in the latter we read 'The price was paid in precious blood, as it were of a lamb without mark or blemish – the blood of Christ'.

The noun *lutrosis* is used twice of the Jewish redemption (Lk. 1. 68, 2. 38), and once of the redemption wrought by Christ (Heb. 9. 12). This last-mentioned passage mentions the blood of Christ, which again points us to the price paid for our deliverance.

But the characteristic New Testament word for redemption is

apolutrosis. This word occurs ten times in the New Testament, and as far as I have been able to find, only ten times in all the rest of Greek literature. As all the other redemption words put together occur in the New Testament only nine times, it is plain that *apolutrosis* has an unusual prominence. This may express something of the conviction of the writers. The redemption wrought by Christ is unique, and not to be spoken of in the same way as other redemption. Yet we must be on our guard against thinking that they see this difference in a weakening of the price-paying idea, as some writers suggest. It is significant that the word chosen is a word which never occurs outside the New Testament other than with a specific price for the deliverance being mentioned.⁶ It seems as if the New Testament writers are concerned to emphasize rather than deny the idea of price.

The price is specifically mentioned in some New Testament passages, as Rom. 3. 24,⁷ Eph. 1. 7 and Heb. 9. 15. If Eph. 1. 7 means redemption by price, there is no reason for denying its use in Eph. 1. 14, which carries on the thought, or in Col. 1. 14 which is a parallel passage. Again, Heb. 11. 35 speaks of a redemption on price of apostasy, so that the basic idea in the word is maintained.

In 1 Cor. 1. 30 redemption is linked with wisdom, righteousness and sanctification as blessings brought to us by Christ. Price is neither mentioned nor excluded. We must attach the same meaning here as in other passages in the New Testament. The other three passages refer to redemption in an eschatological sense

(Lk. 21. 28; Rom. 8. 23; Eph. 4. 30). There are undoubtedly resemblances to the typical Jewish usages in these passages. There is the same eager looking for the final deliverance. But there is one great difference. For Christians redemption could never be understood apart from the cross. The eschatological redemption is not some different work of Christ accomplished quite apart from His death for us. It is the consummation of the work wrought out on Calvary. We must accordingly understand these passages in the light of the cross and not in isolation from it. The redemption terminology thus appears to convey constantly one

clear idea, that of deliverance on payment of price. Always in its non-biblical use this is the important thing. It is the important thing also in the Old Testament in all passages with a human subject. Where God is the subject we saw reason for holding that the word group conveys the meaning that God delivers at cost to himself. In the New Testament the idea of price is very prominent. It is difficult indeed to think that any New Testament writer could ever refer to redemption without having in mind the awful price paid on Calvary. A price, a very great price, was paid for our salvation.

NOTES

(1.) Cf. A. Debrunner, *Griechische Wortbildungslehre*, Heidelberg, 1917, pp. 176f. – (2.) Cf. B. B. Warfield, ‘The only reason for the existence of this verb (i.e. *λυτρον* was to set by the side of the ambiguous *λευω* (*απολευω*) an unambiguous term which would convey with surety, and without aid from the context or from the general understanding ruling its use, the express sense of ransoming. We are not surprised to observe therefore that throughout the whole history of profane Greek literature *λυτρον*, *λυτροσθαι* maintained this sense unbrokenly. Its one meaning is just “to ransom”’ (*The Princeton Theological Review*, xv (1917), p. 207). – (3.) See C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, London, 1957, pp. 52f. for an example. A somewhat different form of release is described by

Grenfell and Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, London, 1898, i. p. 106. – (4.) Cf. B. F. Westcott, ‘it will be obvious from the usage of the LXX that the idea of a ransom received by the power from which the captive is delivered is practically lost in *λυτροσθαι*’ (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, London, 1982, p. 296). T. K. Abbott says that in the Septuagint *λυω* ‘often means simply, “to deliver”’ (I.C.C. on Ephesians, p. 11). – (5.) Cf. B. F. Westcott, ‘It cannot be said that God paid to the Egyptian oppressor any price for the redemption of His people. On the other hand the the idea of the exertion of a mighty force, the idea that the “redemption” costs much is everywhere present’ (*op. cit.* p. 296). – (6.) Most of the texts are quoted in Warfield, *op. cit.* – (7.) F. J. Leenhardt sees here a twofold reference – to the deliverance from Egypt and to the payment of the price to emancipate a slave. (*in Loc.*).