

‘REDEMPTION’ IN ST PAUL

For this coming is itself a word-event of God, climax of so many. And yet it is unique : unique because this time it is not the historical event that becomes a word ; the Word itself becomes an historical event. Christ, being what he was, did indeed work our salvation in action and passion ; but he also enacted a parable of divine love such as the world had not heard nor would hear again—for he was the Word of God. In the dunghill of this creation, in its sordid history, in its stammering tongue, in its crucified flesh, the Truth of God was found. And the last word was the foolish word of the Cross.

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To say that St Paul preached the redemption of mankind by Jesus Christ is a commonplace, but to pinpoint accurately the total background of the term ‘redemption’ as used by St Paul is quite another matter. The core of this problem is the Greek word *apolutrōsis*, ‘redemption,’ found in a number of places in the Apostle’s epistles. The texts are : Rom. 3:24 and 8:23 ; 1 Cor. 1:30 ; Eph. 1:7, 1:14 and 4:30 ; Col. 1:14. In Rom. 8:23 and Eph. 1:14 and 4:30 there is an echo of Luke 12:28, and these texts refer to an eschatological redemption which is yet to come. The remaining four are concerned with that redemption worked on Calvary and in the resurrection by Christ.

Even though this term ‘redemption’ in St Paul can be generally categorised, the question of its background remains. One prominent explanation considers the sacred manumission found in antiquity to be the real key to St Paul’s thought, and this theory, as advanced principally by Adolf Deissmann,¹ has held the field. Many Pauline phrases are compared to the technical formulae of the manumission records in order to bring out the full force of the term ‘redemption.’

Manumission of a slave was accomplished in various ways among the ancients, but emphasis is placed here on the peculiar ceremony by which a slave was purchased by a god. Inscriptions at Delphi are the principal sources of knowledge concerning the nature of the rites involved in sacred manumission. At Delphi the ceremony is connected with Apollo, but manumission of a sacred character was not exclusively

¹ *Light from the Ancient East*, New York 1927, pp. 319–30

Delphic. Sacred manumission can be found in records of Hellenistic synagogues shortly before the time of Paul, so that it can be said that the synagogues adopted the temple practice.

The several steps in pagan manumission are clearly defined. The slave to be freed paid beforehand the sum required for ransom from his own savings into the temple treasury. The master took the slave to the temple to declare publicly that he was for sale; whereupon he received the purchase money from the temple treasury. The slave became the property of the god who immediately declared him a man 'bought' and 'redeemed' by his god.

The existence of such a religious practice does not in itself demonstrate anything concerning St Paul's idea of redemption, but when the terminology of these manumission records is correlated with some of St Paul's phrases, rather striking similarities appear. The evidence is so decisive for some that they unreservedly state, 'St Paul illustrates his teaching on the Redemption by frequent references to this form of contract, and a knowledge of the technical terms used is necessary for the full understanding of the texts.'¹

In 1 Cor. 6:20 and 7:23 there occurs the colourful phrase 'bought at a price.' This term is considered to be taken from pagan manumission, so that St Paul is using a formula of the manumission records. For the supporters of this theory of manumission, 'redemption' has the value of liberation by ransom, which includes the notion of price. Consequently, 'redemption' involves a price to be paid, and when St Paul writes, 'You have been bought at a price,' he means that the Christian has been redeemed at the cost of Christ's blood (Rom. 3:24-5; Eph. 1:7).

Gal. 5:1 and 5:13 are considered as two more points of contact between St Paul and sacred manumission because of the reference to 'freedom,' another formula signifying the redemption brought about in the name of a god. Much in the same vein, the notion of 'freedom' in Rom. 6:18-22 and 8:21 is regarded as technical language from the manumission formulae.

The word 'ransom' in 1 Tim. 2:6 should so remind one of the purchase price for slaves that he would immediately connect 'ransom' with 'bought at a price' in 1 Cor. Such an understanding leads the advocates of this theory to regard the price in St Paul as essentially a ransom. This price is paid by the Redeemer, for the Lord supplies the ransom out of his own blood to free each person from slavery. However, Christian redemption is gratuitous, because this deliverance Jesus did 'freely' (Rom. 3:24).

¹ E. Power, 'Archaeology and the Bible,' *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 81d

Sacred manumission as the background to St Paul's thought on redemption is impressive, and in its favour one can readily see two important factors. The general notion of the rites of manumission in the name of a god was quite widespread, and this form of manumission is definitely of a religious character. Indeed, Hellenistic familiarity with this custom would tend to help St Paul's efforts to make Christ's redemptive work universally known. Also, since manumission could have a sacred character, St Paul's hearers could easily receive the message of Christ's work on Calvary with a religious spirit. However, these two factors which may enhance the theory of sacred manumission are only elements of milieu, not proofs in themselves.

The points of contact between records of manumission and Pauline literature are incontrovertible, but because both employ some identical terms and formulae, dependence is not guaranteed. However, since Paul's language does bear such resemblance to the official phrases of the manumission forms, the satisfactory method of criticism uses a comparison of ideas. In short, the elements of the rite of sacred manumission ought to present an adequate foundation upon which St Paul's teaching on the redemption can rest.

In order to discuss liberation from slavery, there must be someone enslaved. Granting that before redemption by the Lord the individual is in some state of servitude, then the master of the slave is sought. In the case of Hellenistic manumission, we readily understand that whoever owns the slave is his master, but in the case of the redeemed Christian, who is his master prior to liberation?

St Paul clearly speaks of slaves of sin (Rom. 6:6f.), of the Law (Gal. 5:1), and of death (Rom. 8:2), but the chief slavery is to sin. Experience points out that a man works his own sin, if it be actual sin, and in such a state he is really a slave to himself. Because sin does not satisfactorily fit the role of master, some have concluded that Satan is the owner of unredeemed man. The fact that Satan is the great adversary has suggested to these authors that God entered into a transaction with him in order to free man from the bondage of slavery. That St Paul refers to himself as 'a slave of Jesus Christ,' is explained as having been 'derived from the Hellenistic custom of manumission. In view of this custom Paul could call himself the slave of Christ to signify that he had been bought free (redeemed) through Jesus Christ from his former master Sin or Satan.'¹

Though some of the Fathers took this view, they presented the idea that the devil had a right to payment for his slave in different

¹ A. Theissen, 'The Epistle to the Romans,' *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 845d

ways. Origen, St Basil and St Jerome taught it merely in passing. St Ambrose and St Gregory treated the doctrine of ransom to the devil rather fully, but even they treated it along the lines of allegory. As with the modern authors who mention it as a possible solution, it is difficult to know how literally the Fathers believed Satan to be the master of the unredeemed.

Certainly any theory of redemption which claims true dominion for Satan is unscriptural. In no way can it be shown that God relinquished His absolute right over the human creature; by doing so, He would be freeing Himself of His Lordship. From such considerations, no true owner of the unredeemed can be found to correspond with that of the slave to be liberated.

In Hellenistic manumission there is no doubt that the slave furnished the means of redemption, the ransom; equally, no doubt is possible on the point that man of himself does not have the means to accomplish his supernatural redemption. The pagan slave redeemed himself, but the Christian depends totally on Christ's work. Within the framework of sacred manumission the ransom paid by the slave was money; in Christian redemption no money is involved, but to continue the analogy with the pagan rite some price must be found. If one thinks that 'redemption' essentially involves a ransom, then the blood of Christ must be literally the price paid.

The main difficulty with the idea of a literal ransom is that if a purchase price be paid, there is again the question of the one to whom it is paid. Actually, the term 'ransom' occurs in the New Testament in a sacrificial context, since everywhere the sacred writers indicate that the redemption was accomplished by Christ's sacrifice. While sacrificial rites are found with sacred manumission, they are not required for completeness of the manumission. With Christ, however, his sacrificial offering brings about objective deliverance.

The total activity in pagan manumission requires a master, a slave with purchasing resources, and a payment of ransom; the redemption in the Christian revelation lacks these. The slave of sin, the unredeemed, is not outside the Lord's dominion, and he has no sufficiency, nor can he ever acquire any, to accomplish his liberation. Christ delivered him by the sacrifice which is not a literal ransom paid to anyone. Such serious dissimilarities argue against the acceptance of the theory which presents sacral manumission as the background for St Paul's preaching of Christ's work on Calvary. Even making due allowance for the divergences of analogy and wideness of metaphor, the theory of sacred manumission is not an adequate explanation of St Paul's thought because of the lack of congruity between the key concepts.

The theory of sacred manumission as found among the Greeks does not seem to provide an adequate background for St Paul's teaching on redemption. Where, then, are we to find it? Because the Christian Church recognises the continuity of the redemption activity of God in both Testaments, it is necessary to give the Old Testament a hearing. The fact of sacred history is that, while the former Testament speaks of Christ the Redeemer by way of foreshadowing, Jesus most certainly sheds light on the Old Testament so that it takes its proper place in the chronicle of salvation. St Paul's writings and sermons show that his thought flows from the Old Testament, and that he taught what Moses and the prophets foretold. St Paul draws his preaching from the Old Testament, which records God's saving acts toward Israel and which promises salvation to the new Israel, the Church of Christ. So saturated is St Paul with the religious language and concepts of the Old Testament, that we feel the key to his doctrine of redemption by Christ is to be found here.

Before the Israelites came to Sinai, God had first to deliver them from the Egyptian domination; accordingly, God made a promise to Moses:

Say to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.' (Exod. 6:6)

This promise of deliverance the Lord carried out, and in the song of Moses God's power is praised because He redeemed Israel (Exod. 15:2 f.). From this time the people are a redeemed and holy possession of the Lord (Deut. 7:6-8). This act of God makes Him unique, because the God who redeemed Israel from Egypt is the Lord, the only God. If a false prophet should arise proclaiming other gods, he is not to be heard, but put to death, 'because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from bondage' (Deut. 13:1-6). This deliverance from Egypt is the central fact in Israel's history, because the nation, in relation to the Lord, is the people 'whom thou hast redeemed with thy mighty power' (Deut. 9:26; 15:15; 21:8).

At the time that God made the promise of everlasting messianic rule to David, the king recalled the Lord's choice of this people redeemed for Himself (2 Sam. 7:23). Before Nehemias went to Jerusalem he heard of its trouble and prayed for the survivors. He recalled that the Lord promised He would gather the wayward nation back into the land of its fathers if it returned to His service. Nehemias begs God to favour the nation, because 'they are Thy servants and Thy people, whom Thou hast redeemed by Thy great power and by Thy

strong hand' (Neh. 1:10). Also in Micheas the basis of the Lord's reproach of Israel for unfaithfulness is that He made them a free people by delivering them from Egypt (6:3-4).

In the historical passages which speak of the redemption from Egypt the chief idea is that the Lord delivers, not by paying a ransom, but by His strong arm, His power. Jeremias employs this same image of God's power both for creation and for the deliverance from Egypt (32:17-21). The psalms contain much teaching on the redemptive activity of God. The Church of Israel is the congregation which the Lord possesses because He has redeemed it (74:2). Not only has Israel received redemption, but the Lord will continue to redeem His people as He promised (130:7-8). Because the Lord has made His alliance with Israel, 'He sent redemption to His people' (111:9). Israel's glory remains, since the Lord continues to be the nation's Redeemer (78:35; 25:22; 44:27). Moreover, the Lord's redemptive works are not only toward the nation, but He also delivers His faithful servants (34:23; 107:1-2; 26:11; 49:7-8; 19:15; 31:6). In Isaias the testimony is the same: the Lord is the Holy One of Israel, the nation's Redeemer (43:14; 44:24; 41:14).

It was not an ambassador nor a messenger, but the Lord himself saved them. Through his love and his pity for them, he himself has redeemed them. (63:9)

This mighty work of the Lord was the beginning, even the creation of Israel, but the Lord's power did not cease then. Throughout the sacred history, God has kept this people as His possession and He has continued to deliver them by His power (43:1). Moreover, the Lord promises a future redemption to Israel (63:4), a deliverance by His mighty hand, not by ransom (52:3). This future redemption is part of God's promise, since He has allied Himself to Israel (44:21-2). This new Exodus and its covenant is part of the Old Testament concept of redemption and it springs from the historical Exodus and its covenant; the first redemption by God's power is the corner-stone upon which Israel is built, and the new glory of Israel also comes from this future redemption (44:23). God's faithful, the remnant, shall be the basis of the new Israel, 'the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord' (62:12).

From this brief review of Old Testament passages which preach God the Redeemer we draw the conclusion that, though the Bible uses terms which have a long human history behind them, God is the sole cause in divine redemption. There is no-one entitled to receive a ransom, because no ransom is paid. The first redemption or deliverance from Egypt was worked by God's mighty hand, and Israel's continuance in that redeemed state as the Lord's possession

came also from God’s power. When the messianic era breaks forth, then God acts by His grace to bring about another and more glorious redemption. The Lord will free the new Israel from sin, but the ‘redemption’ is divine, not human. When God redeems, the term ‘redemption’ means liberation or deliverance.

To express in human language the full reality of divine redemption is impossible, but the sacred writers adapt the image of redemption to God and His deliverance of Israel in so far as such an application is possible. Redemption in Biblical language is always God’s work, without the notion of ransom ; however, the sacred authors must use the language of man in order to communicate the divine revelation. In Biblical redemption the emphasis is on the universal dominion of God by which He decrees deliverance and on His all-conquering power by which He effects the decree of redemption.

This idea of redemption, then, is found throughout the history of Israel, and the liberation from Egypt furnished the imagery as well as the basis for future redemption, and in it there is no place for the notion of a ransom received by the power from which God delivers. In the New Testament St Paul builds on this Biblical concept of redemption : redemption from sin does not include any idea of ransom, but rather concentrates on the reality of liberation which produces union with God.

Such a background to ‘redemption’ supplies all the positive aspects of Christian redemption and obviates all the difficulties which the manumission theory presents. In the Old Testament God’s action had been on the people outside Himself, but in the New Testament, precisely because Jesus Christ is God become man, both lines of activity are caught up in one person. Jesus accomplishes redemption because he is the God who liberates and he also represents the humanity God delivers. With this notion of redemption one looks neither for a ransom nor for a person to receive a ransom ; the Biblical redemption needs no literal ransom, since it is done solely by God’s power. ‘Redemption’ in St Paul is a continuance of the Biblical idiom for redemption, and the Apostle writes as an heir of the Old Testament.

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