

Ransom Redemption... An Objective Aspect of Atonement

Throughout the New Testament, there are various images that are used to describe the importance of Christ's work of atonement such as penal substitution (see the article: "Substitution... the basis of atonement"), or expiation and propitiation (see the article: "A Word Study of the Greek Terms Hilastērion and Hilasmos - Expiation verses Propitiation"). Redemption, defined as "the act of freeing or liberating", is also associated with Christ's work of atonement.

Lost in the English translation is whether redemption is objective, which is in reference to God's legal and judicial perspective, or subjective, which is in reference to His relationship with human beings.

Eight Greek terms are associated with two English terms "redemption" or "redeem", three of which are used to describe the objective aspects of atonement. Understanding these subtleties provide a richer understanding of atonement and a clearer theology.

Lutron (Strong's #3083)

Definition: This gender neutral noun means 1) ransom or an actual price paid for slaves or life, or 2) to free from the penalty of sin.

It is used twice by Jesus Christ Himself.

Matthew 20:28

just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom (**lutron**) for many.

Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom (**lutron**) for many.

Antilutron (Strong's #487)

Definition: Similar to lutron, this neuter noun is what is given in exchange for another as a price of his redemption or ransom.

This is used only once by the apostle Paul.

1 Timothy 2:6

who gave Himself as a ransom (**antilutron**) for all, the testimony given at the proper time.

Agorazō (Strong's #59)

Definition: This Greek verb means to: 1) to buy or sell as in doing business or 2) to be in the marketplace.

In reference to redemption, this Greek verb is used five times.

1 Corinthians 6:20

For you have been bought (**agorazō**) with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 7:23

You were bought (**agorazō**) with a price; do not become slaves of men.

Ransom Redemption... An Objective Aspect of Atonement (page 2)

2 Peter 2:1

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought (**agorazō**) them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

Revelation 5:9

And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased (**agorazō**) for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Revelation 14:3

And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one could learn the song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been purchased (**agorazō**) from the earth.

While the biblical text is clear that it is Jesus who pays the ransom with His life, it is not apparent who the recipient of this ransom is. Without any clear biblical answer, extrabiblical use of the above Greek terms was usually in the context of a Greco - Roman slave market, so many of the early church understood that human beings were a prisoner to Satan, which became the basis of the early theory of "Ransom to Satan". From this incorrect understanding Jesus was the ransom price that God paid to free human beings from Satan's ownership.

However the cultural usage of these Greek terms was not how Jesus intended their meaning. Jesus, God the Son, spoke of redemption as a ransom with a price, just as God the Father spoke of redemption with a price in the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, this concept of redemption was applied to property (Lev 25:23-34; Ruth 4:1-12), animals (Ex 34:19-20), individuals (Lev 25:35-55) and the nation of Israel (Deut 15:15), and in most cases, freedom from obligation, bondage or danger was secured by the payment of a price, ransom, or bribe.

Exodus 13:1-16 and Numbers 18:15-17 is one of the earliest commands God makes regarding the ransoming of human beings in the "ransom of the firstborn".

Moses wanted to impress on the nation of Israel the importance of Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. That day marked their redemption from the "land of slavery" and journey to the "land of promise".

When in the Promised Land, the nation of Israel was to dedicate to God their firstborn sons and firstborn male animals. These firstborns were obligated to God, because they, heeding His instructions of marking their doorposts with the blood of a lamb, were redeemed from Egypt's tenth plague.

For this redemption, God placed a special claim on the Hebrew first born male son, and these first born sons were presented to God when they were one month old. Regarded as God's property, the father had to redeem or buy back the child from the priest, and this redemption price could not exceed five shekels (Num 18:15-16). This ceremonial procedure was to remind people of God's judgment and His gracious deliverance.

Ceremonially clean firstborn male animals were sacrificed; unclean animals, such as donkeys, were redeemed with the sacrifice of a lamb in their place or killed.

Ransom Redemption... An Objective Aspect of Atonement (page 3)

God intended this law as the means to provide the Levitical priesthood with money and provision as they maintained the temple and served Him. The tribe of Levi had received no inheritance of land.

The practice of this law is seen with the infant Jesus in Luke 2:21-24.

In Numbers 3:40-51; 8:15-19, when the tabernacle was established, a census is taken of all of the firstborn males one month or older of each tribe.

In establishing the tribe of Levi as His priesthood, God formally set them apart by redeeming each firstborn with each firstborn Levite. The remaining number of unredeemed firstborns was ransomed with five shekels.

Thus the tribe of Levi would serve as ransom and redeem the first born Hebrew male of the other tribes; however, they themselves would not be redeemed for they were now dedicated to the service of God.

In Exodus 30:11-16, God commands that when a census is taken, all Hebrew males 20 years and older are to pay a half shekel in atonement of their lives / soul. This practice became known as “atonement money”.

God considered everyone above age 20 to be in need of atonement, and the price was the same regardless of age or wealth.

The word “silver” in Hebrew is often translated as “money”, and this first collection of atonement silver was used in the sockets of the tabernacle boards. Some scholars have noted the imagery of the tabernacle being built upon the foundation of atonement.

By this time two census counts took place.

God instructs Moses to take a census of all male firstborns 1 month or older for the consecration of the Levites (Num 3:14-51).

God instructs Moses and Eleazar to take a census of all men 20 years or older from the nation of Israel who were able to go to war (Num 26:1-4).

This command would later evolve into the Jewish practice of the Temple tax mentioned in Matthew 17:24-27.

In keeping the law of “ransom of the firstborn” and “atonement money”, the nation of Israel was constantly reminded of the concept of ransom for a forfeited life.

In the Old Testament, ransom, when involved with atonement, the price is paid to God who was offended by the sins of human beings. In other instances, ransom is used to pay the rightful owner (Ex 21:28-30). Thus when Christ used the term “ransom”, it was not in the context of a Greco – Roman slave market. And because Satan is neither offended by the sins of human beings nor their rightful owner, the basis for “ransom to Satan” is unfounded.

Since “ransom” is paid to God, the term is therefore used in the objective sense, and the Greek terms “lutron” and “antilutron” are terms that describe the objective sense of redemption.

The verb “agorazō” is another Greek term associated with this objective sense, which can be seen in 2 Peter 2:1.

Ransom Redemption... An Objective Aspect of Atonement (page 4)

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought (**agorazō**) them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.”

There have been debates about who the Master is, because it affects one's view of atonement. The Greek term "despotēs" (Strong's #1203) has been used to refer to human beings (Tit 2:9; 1 Pet 2:18), God the Father (Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24; Rev 6:10) and Jesus Christ (Jude 1:4).

However, there are three lines of evidence that strongly support the interpretation that the "despotēs" mentioned in 2 Peter 2:1 is referring to Jesus Christ.

1. 2 Peter and Jude share strong literary similarities and vocabulary, and scholars believe that the evidence points to Peter borrowing from Jude.
2. The apostle Paul indicates in two instances the use of the compound Greek verb "exagorazo" which means "to buy off" or "to deliver by paying the price", and he defines the means of the purchase: Christ.
3. Jesus Christ Himself speaks of paying a ransom with His life for human beings (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45).

With this understanding that the "Master" is Jesus Christ in 2 Peter 2:1, the term "bought" (agorazō) is in the context of redemption. There are several ways of interpreting this passage:

- a. The false teachers were at some point saved but lost their salvation. However, this would contradict the assurance of salvation (i.e. John 3:16).
- b. This passage is in reference to Deuteronomy 32:6 where God speaks of "bought" in the context of ownership. From this perspective everyone who participated in the Exodus was owned by God including false prophets who were later rose among the Jews. Peter is drawing a similar comparison to the church.

This view believes that in 1 and 2 Peter, the apostle Peter portrays the church with the imagery of the Hebrews of the Old Testament. However, this stretches the meaning of "agorazō", and for a variety of reasons, 2 Peter is believed to be written to a largely Gentile group.

- c. The only way Jesus Christ can redeem false teachers is in the objective sense; namely that Jesus Christ paid the redemption price for their salvation to God, but they were not saved.

This interpretation seems to be the most natural and consistent with sound hermeneutics.

Ransom Redemption... An Objective Aspect of Atonement (page 5)

Three Greek terms, lutron, antilutron, and agorazō, are used to describe the objective sense of atonement, which is in reference to God's legal and judicial perspective and has an emphasis on the ransom aspects of redemption.

"Lutron" is the price of redemption.

"Antilutron" is the price in exchange for something.

"Agorazō" is the action of purchasing or buying something.

Its basis and conceptual origination can be seen in the Old Testament. It is particularly striking to see the similarities of the atonement of Jesus Christ to the redemption of the Firstborn by the Levites and the practice of Atonement money.

References:

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