



THEOPOPEDIA
Archiving the history of theologico-political concepts

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REDEMPTION. A HISTORICAL-CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE

in: *Theopopedia. Archiving the history of theologico-political concepts*, ed. by T. Faitini, F. Ghia, M. Nicoletti, University of Trento, Trento 2015-2018

URL: <https://theopopedia.lett.unitn.it/lexicon/redemption-i-presentation>

ISBN 978-88-8443-616-0

ABSTRACT:

The entry explores some aspects of the history of the concept of ‘redemption, focusing on its juridical background. Attention is given to the close relationship between the interpretation of Jesus' salvific action by early Christian authors, on the one hand, and the practical and theoretical tradition of the liberation of prisoners or debtors, crystallised in the Roman law institution of the *redemptio*, on the other. Such a relationship helps to better understand the broad and nuanced spectrum of the concept, which, far from being centred on a single significant event, seems to encompass a complex network of theological, social, political and economic relations.

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1. *The juridical institution of the redemptio*

In classical Latin, the term *redemptio* – whose etymology derives from the verb *emo* and suggests the action of “acquisition” or “reacquisition” – usually referred to the juridical institution that clarified the methods and consequences of the payment of ransoms for Roman captives held by the enemy.² This institution was an element of the *ius postliminium*, the discipline that protected the *status* of Roman citizens who had been held beyond the borders of the *civitas* and then returned to their homeland. After suffering the temporary suspension of their civil rights and liberty, and being reduced to the *status servitutis*, they regained their *libertas*.³

In this case, the *redemptor* is the person who «emit hominem ab hostibus». During the reign of Severus a legally binding relation was created between the *redemptus* and the *redemptor*, introduced, perhaps, with the aim of increasing the number of prisoners of war redeemed through commercial exchanges. The *redemptus* thus found himself indebted to his *redemptor*, who had paid his ransom; this debt could be paid either in service or money. The *captivi* who, before their imprisonment had been *servi*, immediately became, due to their redemption, the property of the person who had redeemed them (unless their previous *dominus* repaid the *redemptor* and took possession of them again). On the other hand, human beings who had previously been free, on their return *in civitatem*, had their liberty and citizenship restored (after having lost them, in accordance with *ius postliminium*, during their imprisonment); yet, certain measures were introduced to create an economic tie between the redeemed person and the *familia* of his redeemer, in order to guarantee that the latter was repaid.⁴

In peace time, *redemptio* came to be associated with the area of what we would term private law, to indicate the return to liberty of a citizen who had previously had to sell himself into servitude to a *dominus* in order to pay overwhelming debts. This *redemptio a domino* also required the payment of a price or the liquidation of a debt. This was possible through the intervention of a third party, who then became the new *dominus* of the *servus*, or through a gradual repayment made directly by

¹ An extended version of this article will be published in T. Faitini, “The redemption between law and theology. The theological translation of the Roman *redemptio* in the Patristics”, in W. Decock, P. Angelini, W. Drouwé (eds), *Ius commune graeco-romanum in honor of Laurent Waelkens*. Leuven: Peeters Publisher, 2019, pp. 37-52.

² The custom can clearly be traced back to Ancient Greece and other ancient societies. See P. Ducrey, “Aspects juridiques de la victoire et du traitement des vaincus”, in: J.-P. Vernant (ed.), *Problèmes de la guerre en Grèce ancienne*, Paris 1968, p. 231-243.

³ On the juridical aspects see, among others, L. Amirante, *Redemptio ab hostibus*, in *Novissimo Digesto Italiano*, Torino 1976, vol. XIV, pp. 1102-104; M.V. Sanna, *Ricerche in tema di 'redemptio ad hostibus'*, Cagliari 1998; S. Barbati, “Sui presupposti di applicazione e la natura giuridica degli effetti del *postliminium*”, *Atti dell'Accademia Romanistica Costantiniana* 20(2014), pp. 587-813. A historical contextualisation in Y. Rivière, “Captivité et retour de captivité dans la Rome impériale”, *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, 42 (2008), <http://ccrh.revues.org/3446> (last access 15.11.2017). On the opposition between *status servitutis* and *status libertatis*, and its influence on the development of civil law see L. Waelkens, *Amne adverso, Roman legal heritage in European culture*, Leuven 2015, ch. 2.

⁴ A redeemed citizen became a free *alumnus* of his redeemer's family, to whom he was economically tied until his debt was repaid. See L. Waelkens, “La *redemptio ab hostibus* e la *redemptio a domino* nel diritto romano”, in T. Faitini, M. Nicoletti (eds.), *Redimere e riscattare. La redemptio tra teologia e politica*, Politica e religione. Annuario di teologia politica, Brescia 2017. See also S. Barbati, “La *redemptio ab hostibus* e lo status del *redemptus*”, in C. Lorenzi, M. Navarra (eds.), *Frontiere della romanità nel mondo tardo antico. Appartenenza, contiguità, alterità. Trasformazione e prassi*, Napoli 2016, pp. 133- 254.

the *servus* to his *dominus*: the wages gained by the *servus* were recorded within the household accounts of the *familia* which he had voluntarily joined.⁵

We see that the *redemptio*, far from signifying a simple change of *status*, shaped an entire network of social, economic and political relationships. We must now ask ourselves to what extent and in what ways the juridical apparatus of redemption, limited by definition to the concrete case of prisoners of war and debtors, interacted with the theological concept expressed in the biblical texts, giving rise to a conceptualization which is considerably broader in both its object and its scope: the conceptuality developed in relation to redemption, in fact, involves, in various ways, the entire network of social, economic and political relations in Western society.⁶ The theological translation of redemption – which occurred during the Early Christian period – is clearly key to our understanding of this interaction. What follows is an analysis of some of the most important of the many relevant examples to be found in the patristic texts.

2. *Redemptio in the Patristics*

The full semantic spectrum of commerce, of ransom, of the liberation of slaves and prisoners, is used in the New Testament – especially in the letters of Paul and Peter – to describe the actions of Jesus.⁷ The New Testament authors are already fully aware of the juridical valence of the concept of the *lytron* (which becomes *redemptio* in Latin versions), introduced to characterize the state of humanity and the salvation attained through the Passion of Christ. This valence is fully explored by some of the earliest authors, who construct their own interpretations of the biblical story of salvation, weaving a dense web of internal references and fully exploiting the complexities – juridical included – of the concepts used.

Some of the texts by Origen and Ambrose, in particular, are extremely explicit and allow us considerable insight into the ways in which the concept was adapted. Their analyses are not merely based on simple lexical borrowing, but on a structural analogy which is introduced and replicated in the explanation and the institutionalization of the redemptive mechanism.

The presence of a long exegetical tradition which explains the Passion of Christ – both the event itself, and its effects – according to a juridico-economic logic does not, of course, mean that this is necessarily the most appropriate theological interpretation, or the closest to the biblical text, whether the Old or the New Testament. This interpretation was, in fact, intensely debated and revised.⁸ Whatever its merits, it was elaborated at length and had a profound influence, and thus

⁵ See L. Waelkens, “La personne dans le travail en servitude du droit romain antique et médiéval” in: J.-M. Tufféry-Andrieu -F. Laronze, *Les normes du travail: une affaire de personnes?*, Brussels 2016, p. 33-51; S. Heinemeyer, *Der Freikauf des Sklaven mit eigenem Geld, Redemptio suis nummis*, Berlin 2013; on the financial accounting within the *familia*, see also L. Waelkens, “L’origine romaine des obligations naturelles”, *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 90(2012), pp. 318-321.

⁶ Suffice it to evoke the classic analysis provided in 1938 by Eric Voegelin’s *Political Religions* (English tr. by T.J. DiNapoli, Lewiston 1986), and the philosophical interpretation given, in 1940, by Walter Benjamin’s “On the concept of history” (English tr. in *Selected writings, vol. 4: 1938-1940*, ed. by H. Eiland – M.W. Jennings, Cambridge-London 2003, pp. 389-400; see also his fragment “Capitalism as Religion”, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: 1913–1926, ed. by M. Bullock – M.W. Jennings, Cambridge-London 2002, pp. 288-91). A fascinating insight into the political and social implications of the concept of *redemption* is provided by M. Nicoletti, “Politik und Erlösung”, in: P. Koslowski (eds.), *Endangst und Erlösung 2. Rechtfertigung, Vergeltung, Vergebung in Philosophie und Theologie*, München 2012, pp. 133-148.

⁷ See F. Büchsel, “Lytron”, in: G. Kittel-G. Friedrich (eds.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Stuttgart 1933-1978, vol. IV, col. 340-56.

⁸ As for the Bible, see the framework offered by G.L. Prato, “‘Sarete riscattati senza denaro’ (Is 52,3): la redenzione nell’Antico Testamento tra metafora teologica e linguaggio giuridico ibrido”, in T. Faitini – M. Nicoletti (eds.), *Redimere e riscattare*, with further references, and S. Lyonnet – L. Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice. A Biblical and Patristic Study*, Roma 1998. For the history of the theological debate, in addition to the latter see at least J. Rivière, *Le dogme de la rédemption. Essai d’étude historique*, Paris 1905; H.E.W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of Doctrine During the First Five Centuries*, Eugene (OR) 1952; G.

deserves a central place in the historical picture. Importantly, it provides a significant insight into how the Graeco-Roman law contributed to the shaping of theological interpretations and, through them, to the conceptualization of social, economic and political relationships.

Let us now begin with Origen and his *Commentary* on Paul's Letter to the Romans, handed down to us in Rufino's translation. This text dwells frequently upon the subject of ransom and redemption, focusing upon the *public* dimension of *redemptio* (as understood in times of war and which provides for the paying of a ransom to the enemy).

The identity of the enemy with which Origen was concerned is quite evident. The Greek term *diabolos*, in the Septuagint, is used to translate the Hebrew *sātān*, the primary meaning of which, in the Old Testament, was "enemy". While other accessions, according to which the devil is identified as a malevolent, persuasive seducer, were retained, this became the most common meaning of the term in the New Testament. The same is true for the Latin *diabolus*, which is a direct transliteration of the Greek and is more widespread than the transliteration from the Hebrew *satanas*⁹.

When dealing with the well-known text of Romans 3:24,¹⁰ Origen starts by observing that the term *redemptio* «refers to that which is given to enemies for those whom they are keeping in captivity» so that they can be restored to their «original freedom».¹¹ He then deduces that the same thing has happened to human beings:

Captives conquered by sin, as if by war, were being held fast, then, by the enemies of the human race. The Son of God came, who "has become for us" not only "wisdom from God and righteousness and holiness" but also "redemption". He gave himself as the redemption price, that is to say, he handed himself over to the enemies and, what is more, pour out his own blood to those thirsting for it; and this is the redemption accomplished for those who believe, just as Peter also writes in his epistle when he says, "You were redeemed not with perishable silver or gold, but with the precious blood of the only begotten Son of God".¹²

The ransom in question is, as we see in 1Peter 1:18-19, none other than the «precious blood of Christ» and it is clear from these lines that this blood is going to be given to the enemies of mankind, here referred to in the plural. The identity of these enemies is understood implicitly, and elsewhere Origen reiterates that the reference is to «the ruler of this world and the evil powers under him» who «captured and conquered» men, and demanded that a ransom [*lytron*] be paid for their release.¹³

A little further on, we read:

Through the sacrifice of himself he would make God propitious to men and through this he would manifest his own righteousness [*iustitiam suam*] as he forgives them their past sins, which they had contracted by serving the worst tyrants [*pessimis tyrannis serviendo*] at the time when God was tolerating and allowing this to be done. God allowed this so that afterwards, i.e. at this time, he

Anderson, *Sin: A History*, New Haven 2009, pp. 111-32. The theological interpretation of salvation in terms of ransom from the enemy is highlighted by W. Elert, "Redemptio ab hostibus", *Theologische Literaturzeitung* (1947), pp. 265-70.

⁹ W. Foerster – G. von Rad, *Diábollo, Diábolos*, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, cit., vol. II, coll. 69-80.

¹⁰ See D.F. Tolmie, "Salvation as Redemption: The Use of 'Redemption' Metaphors in Pauline Literature", in: J.G. van der Watt (ed.), *Salvation in the New Testament. Perspectives on Soteriology*, Leiden 2005, pp. 247-69, for an analysis of this passage and of Paul's lexicon.

¹¹ Origen, *In epistula Pauli ad Romanos explanationum libri I-IV*, 2 voll., ed. F. Cocchini, Roma 2014, vol. I, III.7, pp. 286-88; English tr. in *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Books 1-5*, ed. T.P. Scheck, FOTC 103, Washington 2009, p. 215. On Origen's interpretation of the redemption see J.A. Alcain, *Cautiverio y redención del hombre en Origenes*, Bilbao 1973, which distinguishes 5 different interpretations, among which a «commercial» interpretation, based around economic sale (pp. 177-222), and a «juridical» one, given in terms of debt (pp. 224-37).

¹² Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Books 1-5*, III.7.14, p.215.

¹³ See Origen's fragment commenting on Ephesians 1:7, edited in J.A.F. Gregg, "The commentary of Origen upon the Epistle to the Ephesians", *Journal of Theological Studies* 3 (1901-02), pp. 233-44: 238; English tr. in *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, ed. by R.E. Heine, Oxford 2002, p. 91.

would manifest his own righteousness. For at the consummation of the age, at the end of time, God disclosed his own righteousness and, for the redemption price, gave him whom he made a propitiator [*redemptionem dedit eum, quem propitiatorem fecit*].¹⁴

Here, it is justice that distinguishes the divine action explained by Origen, which he contrasts with the power exercised by the devil. The devil is an appalling tyrant, as, indeed, he would continue to be conceived in subsequent political thought. This, however, does not detract from the fact that, according to Origen, the devil has rights, and is fully entitled to a ransom: it is justice, indeed, which both explains and guarantees the mechanism of redemption as Origen conceives it. The devil's revendication is exercised by «lawful right [*iure aequissimo*]»,¹⁵ as Augustine will put it, in a long and clear passage of his *Libero arbitrio*, testifying to the enduring influence of Origen's interpretation although, as is well-known, Augustine endeavours to reformulate it.

The immediate problem of this interpretation is clearly the almost Gnostic vision – the legitimization of a diabolic figure in opposition to, and on equal terms with, God – implied by the recognition of Satan's right to receive a ransom.¹⁶ Another difficulty also arises from the mechanism introduced by a juridical interpretation of the redemption. The question regards the status of the *redemptus* and the ties that bind him to his *redemptor*. The implication that someone redeemed by Christ thus entered into a *status servitutis* was clearly problematical from an exegetical point of view, given the explicit references in the New Testament to the freedom of the sons of God and the relationship of brotherhood and friendship that Jesus has with those called by God.¹⁷ Origen, for instance, solves the problem by distinguishing between two states: the ideal one is that of a son, free from fear, but, before this, man must experience servitude, and fear of his redeemer.¹⁸

Ambrose, for his part, explicitly accepted the juridical implications that established a link of dependence – debt or servitude – between the *redemptor* and the *redemptus*. The link between the coming of Christ and *redemptio* had been clear from the very moment of his birth, according to Ambrose, who, commenting on the universal census ordered by Augustus in his lengthy *Exposition* of Gospel of Luke, reinterprets the event in explicitly juridical term. This approach, in fact, runs through all of Ambrose's work, providing further confirmation of his stature as a translator of an entire cultural inheritance: he is indeed an essential figure for any historian of thought attempting to probe the constant interchange between theology and politics.¹⁹

¹⁴ Origen, *In epistula Pauli ad Romanos*, cit., III.5, p. 288; English tr. in *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Books 6-10*, ed. T.P. Scheck, FOTC 104, Washington 2009,

¹⁵ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, III, 10.29 and 31, in *Aurelii Augustini Opera*, Pars II/2, ed. W.M. Green, CCSL 29, Turnhout 1970, pp. 293-94; English tr. by M. Pontifex, *The problem of free choice*, Westminster 1955, III, 10.31, p. 173.

¹⁶ Exegetics and theologians debated this objection vigorously, and, in the end, eschewed the theory of *iura diaboli*. On this debate, see, among others, J. Rivière, *Le dogme de la rédemption*, cit., pp. 374ss; S. Lyonnet – L. Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice*, cit., pp. 207ss; “The rule of Satan” in G.M. Lukken, *Original Sin in the Roman Liturgy. Research into the Theology of original Sin in the Roman Sacramentaria and the early Baptismal Liturgy*, Leiden 1973, pp. 157-199. On the medieval discussion of the issue, see B. Pasciuta, “Il diavolo e il diritto: il *Processus Satanae* (XIV sec.)”, in: *Il diavolo nel Medioevo. Atti del XLIX Convegno storico internazionale (Todi, 14-17 ottobre 2012)*, Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Spoleto 2013, pp. 421-447.

¹⁷ However, the passages in which Paul calls himself the «slave of Christ» (among which 1 Corinthians 7:22) must also be taken into account in this regard. See the synthesis given by the entry *doulon* in C. Spicq, *Lexique théologique du Nouveau Testament*, Paris 1991, pp. 391-97, in particular 392-93.

¹⁸ See Origen, *In epistula Pauli ad Romanos*, cit., VII.1, vol. II, pp. 218-24. On this see J. Rivière, *Le dogme de la rédemption*, cit., pp. 248-49, and J.A. Alcain, *Cautiverio y redención del hombre en Orígenes*, cit., p. 182, who highlights the inner tensions of Origen's writings on this aspect. Similarly, Jerome's text, quoted above in footnote 20, goes on to specify that redemption does not implies servitude to Christ.

¹⁹ On Ambrose's use of Roman law, see J. Gaudemet, “Droit séculier et droit de l'église chez Ambroise”, in: G. Lazzati (ed.), *Ambrosius episcopus. Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel 16. centenario della elevazione di sant'Ambrogio alla cattedra episcopale. Milano, 2-7 dicembre 1974*, 2 vol., Milano 1976, vol. 1, pp. 286-315, esp. pp. 287-300; Id., *Le droit romain dans la littérature chrétienne occidentale du III^e au V^e siècle*, Ius Romanum Medii Aevi I.3.b, Milano 1978, pp. 71-98.

In Luke's account of Jesus' birth the bishop of Milan finds all of the elements contractually necessary to validate the «redempti[o] omnium»:

The first enrolment was made when Cyrinus was governor, so that the Evangelist seems to have entered, as it were, the consul in this book as a token. For if consuls are entered in the lists of purchases [*adscribuntur tabulis emtionis*], how much more must the time be entered for the redemption of all [*redemptioni omnium*]! Thus, ye have everything which was customarily included in the contracts [*in contractibus*]: the name of the man holding the supreme power then, the day, the place, the cause. Witness, too, are wont to be used.²⁰

In these lines, which also appears in the ordinary Gloss to Luke 2:2,²¹ redemption is clearly conceptualized as a contract, in the most literal sense: the place, the witnesses, the names of the governors were all given. The universal census, according to Ambrose, in its provision of 'hard evidence', fulfilled a need within the divine redemptive plan. There are further references to *redemptio* later on in the *Exposition*, where Ambrose, echoing John 8:34, remarks that man is sold because he sins and is slave to sin: a condition of servitude which is afterwards redeemed through divine goodness.²² This, however, establishes a clear relationship of dependence and debt between redeemer and redeemed, which is asserted throughout the *Exposition*.²³

This relationship is often made even more explicit in Ambrose's writings. Men have changed their creditor, not discharged their debt.²⁴ The fact that the debt contracted with Christ is infinite, and cannot be repaid, does not exclude the need to make some sort of reparation.²⁵ The use of the terms *servus/dominus*, and the need to recompense the *dominus* for the costs he has sustained, leave no room for argument. Noteworthy, too, is the reference to the *chirographum*, i.e. the promissory note of which Paul writes in the Letter to the Colossians 2:13-14 in relation to the inscription *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* attached to the cross.²⁶ And for Ambrose it was simply logical to deduce that, in relation to a *Christus* who had become *dominus* and *redemptor*, the *redemptus* was a *servus*:

²⁰ Ambrose, *Expositionis Evangelii secundum Lucam libri I-V*, II.39, in *Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera* 11, 2 voll., ed. M. Adriaen – G. Coppa, Roma 1978, vol. I, p. 180; English tr. by T. Tomkinson *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, Etna California 1998, §II.39, p. 51. On the interpretations of the census in Patristic and medieval exegeses see T. Faitini, "Per una storia del concetto di professione. La traduzione teologica dell'istituto giuridico romano della *professio census*", *Filosofia politica*, 1 (2016), pp. 109-22; see also the essays collected in *Censo, ceto, professione. Il censimento come problema teologico-politico*, Politica e religione. Annuario di teologia politica, Brescia 2015.

²¹ Gloss 'Cyrino' on Luke 2:2 (*Glossa ordinaria cum Biblia latina*, cit., [http://gloss-
e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?livre=../sources/editions/./sources/editions/GLOSS-liber57.xml&chapitre=5](http://gloss-
e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?livre=../sources/editions/./sources/editions/GLOSS-liber57.xml&chapitre=5),
last access 01.02.2018).

²² Ambrose, *Expositionis Evangelii secundum Lucam*, cit., X.66, vol. II, p. 444: «*Omnis deinde qui facit peccatum servus est peccati. Peccatis inquit vestris venditi estis. Venditio propter peccata nostra, propter bonitatem autem dei redemptio peccatorum*». See also, with reference to 1 Peter 1:18-19, *ibi*, VII.117, vol. II, p. 178.

²³ *Ibi*, VI.25, vol. II, pp. 26-28. Earlier, Ambrose defines the spiritual «money of the virtues» through which the debt has to be repaid, *ibi*, VI.24, vol. II, p. 26.

²⁴ See this passage of *Epistula 1(41)*, §§7-8, in *Sancti Ambrosii epistulae et acta*, 4 voll., ed. O. Faller – M. Zelzer, Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, Vienna 1968-1996, vol. III, pp. 149-50. See also *Epistula 69(72)*, §8 (*ibi*, vol. II, p. 182), which states that the creditor, i.e. the devil, must, of necessity, be repaid.

²⁵ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, ed. I. Cazzaniga, Torino 1952, XIX.126, p. 100, my translation: «We were distrained by the evil creditor for our sins. We signed the document of debt [*chirographum culpae*], we owed the penance of blood: the Lord Jesus came and gave his blood in the place of ours; but you cannot repay the blood. A good servant [*servus*] has to pay to his lord [*dominus*] the price he paid: if you cannot repay the price, you must at least prevent the price from seeming unworthy».

²⁶ Different exegeses and meanings associated with the *chirographum* are summarised by G.M. Lukken, *Original Sin in the Roman Liturgy*, cit., pp. 177-80. A number of exegetical interpretations highlighting its economic implications are discussed in R.C. Mueller, «*Eva a dyabolo peccatum mutuavit. Peccato originale, prestito usurario e redemptio*», in: D. Quaglioni – G. Todeschini – G.-M. Varanini (eds.), *Credito e usura fra teologia, diritto e amministrazione: linguaggi a confronto (sec. XII-XVI)*, Roma 2005, pp. 227-45; V. Toneatto, *Les banquiers du Seigneur. Évêques et moins face à la richesse (IV^e-début IX^e siècle)*, Rennes 2012, pp. 173-77.

«no one is a free man», indeed, because men «are all freedmen [*liberti*] of Christ». The juridical knowledge revealed by Paul's terminology is openly asserted to conclude that «you who have been created are a slave, you who have been redeemed are a slave, and you owe servitude to Him as your Lord and Redeemer [*quasi domino servitutem debes et quasi redemptori*]».²⁷

The hermeneutical difficulties that Christian thinkers got themselves into as they tried to reconcile the stratification of the Biblical text with their own cultural and juridical mindset are manifest in the uncertainties and somewhat forced nature of their readings. Nevertheless, these readings demonstrate the extent to which the original juridical institution – together with the web of relationships, above all that between *redemptor* and *redemptus*, that it resulted in and governed – was interpreted and reinterpreted and sometimes turned upside down in the process of making it theological, although it never ceased to be a point of reference.

These considerations on the *status* of servitude and debt in relation to Christ the Redeemer evoke the *private law* aspect of *redemptio*, i.e. that of the debt slavery, which was ended by the *redemptio a domino*. On this subject, the above passages from Ambrose appear quite transparent.²⁸ There is, however, a passage which better renders both the lucidity and the creativity of the conceptual transposition – and was also the beginning of a reading of human activity in monetary terms which undoubtedly had a significant impact on Christian moral thought: the long exegetical passage is from Origen's homily on Exodus, translated by Rufino. The sixth homily, in particular, describes the triumphant crossing of the Red Sea and dwells on the text of Exodus 15:16, which, praising the power of God, contrasts the enemy with «the people you acquired».

The need to explain this purchase began a long aside on Origen's interpretation of the Old Testament episode. Men belong to God from the moment of their conception, writes Origen, since he is their Creator. The need for him to buy them is only explained by the fact that they «belong[ed] to another», having sold themselves to Satan because of their sins.²⁹ And, in his view, this happens because each sin corresponds to a coin received from the devil.³⁰ In a literal system of moral accounting, Origen's reasoning – which is later echoed by Ambrose³¹ – associates the sum of money received by the devil with the debt contracted with him, which makes men his slaves. This is why Christ has to redeem men, by paying the price of their sins with his blood; this, Origen concludes, is why God himself has to buy his own people.³² These lines clearly reveal the extent to which the Passion was conceptualized as a financial transaction. It was interpreted as the payment of a ransom and, therefore, the acknowledgement of a loan which every believer must value in order to comprehend the sum of his debt to Christ.³³

²⁷ Ambrose, *De Iacob et vita beata*, I.3.12, in *Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera* 3, ed. C. Schenkl - R. Palla, Roma 1982, pp. 242-44; English tr. in *Seven exegetical works*, ed. by M.P. McHugh, FOTC 65, Washington 1972, pp. 127-28. The passage comments upon 1 Corinthians 7:22. Other passages in the commentary on Paul's letters which were, until the 16th century, attributed to Ambrose, thus ensuring the significance of their influence on medieval doctrine, are equally insistent upon this point. See Ambrosiaster, *In Epistulam ad Romanos*, XIV.8, in *Ambrosiastri qui dicitur commentarius in epistulas paulinas*, Pars prima, ed. H.I. Vogels, Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, Vienna 1966, recensio γ, p. 439.

²⁸ See also Tertullian, *De fuga in persecutione* 12.3, in *Tertulliani opera*, pars II: *Opera montanistica*, ed. A. Gerlo, CCSL 2, Turnhout 1954, p. 1150. Tertullian's use of juridical categories is constant, although his precision is debated (see R. Martini, "Tertulliano giurista e Tertulliano padre della Chiesa", *Studia et documenta historiae et iuris* 41(1975), pp. 78-124), and J. Gaudemet, *Le droit romain dans la littérature chrétienne occidentale du III^e au V^e siècle*, cit., pp. 15-32).

²⁹ Cfr. Origen, *Homiliae in Exodum*, ed. M. Simonetti, Roma 2005, VI§9, p. 190; English tr. in *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, ed. R.E. Heine, Washington 2002, p. 295.

³⁰ Origen, *Homiliae in Exodum*, VI§9, cit., pp. 190-92; English tr. in *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, cit., p. 296.

³¹ See e.g. Ambrose, *De Iacob et vita beata*, cit., I.3.10, p. 240.

³² Origen, *Homiliae in Exodum*, VI§9, p. 192: «Paulo latius progressi sumus, dum volumus exponere, quomodo Deus quae sua sunt, dicatur *acquirere* et *redimere* Christus sanguine pretioso, quos emerat diabolus vili mercede peccati».

³³ See the analysis of Augustine's homily n. 130 proposed by V. Toneatto, *Les banquiers du Seigneur*, cit., p. 175.

3. Conclusion. Towards the Middle Ages

The implications of the juridical institution were extensively elaborated by the Christian authors in their endeavour to understand, through a sort of structural analogy, Christ's act of redemption. The most directly public and political aspect of the *redemptio ab hostibus* proved the most suitable terrain upon which to construct the institutions and identity of the Christian community, of which the contrast between the Kingdoms of Heaven and Hell and the coexistence, in history, of two cities under two different rulers, is an integral part. On the other hand, the Passion was presented by Early Christian exegetical experts as an economic transaction, which also involved an actual dynamic of debt – even servitude – between redeemer and redeemed.

The conceptual link between *redemptio* and *paenitentia* also demonstrates this dynamic.³⁴ This link, in fact, involves the penitential practices which meticulously regulated the lives of the faithful according to a discipline which gradually extended to involve (at least in theory) the whole *societas christiana*. The penitential books which became common in the Early Middle Ages, in particular, provide us with an eloquent example of the link between *redemptio* and *paenitentia*, because of both their rigorous juridico-economic logic and the concepts they used in fixing penitential tariffs for specific sins.³⁵ The tariffs – expressed in fasting periods over weeks and years – *redeemed* the sins of the penitent, and could then themselves be *redeemed* (i.e. substituted) by reciting psalms and singing hymns: the term *redemptio* was also used in both these senses. Moreover, the *redemptor* of a penitent who was not able to fast – or to recite the psalms in Latin – could also be a pious person to whom the former donated money. This practice provided the religious communities with a certain wealth which should only have been used to help the poor and – in a sort of circle of *redemptiones* – to *redeem* prisoners.³⁶

Over its history, the concept of “redemption” became a fabric full of nuances, in which different threads from different spheres were entwined. Its analysis provides a vivid example of the close, reciprocal intertwining of theological and juridical concepts and practices which has characterised Western tradition, and allows us to see how Graeco-Roman law contributed to the shaping of theological interpretations and, through them, to the conceptualization of social, economic and political interactions.

³⁴ See P. Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul. Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*, London 2015, who contextualises the last wills *pro redemptione animae* which blossomed during the Early Middle Ages. See also G. Todeschini, *Il prezzo della salvezza. Lessici medievali del pensiero economico*, Roma 1994, pp. 119-43.

³⁵ On this genre see C. Vogel, *Les “libri poenitentiales”*, Turnhout 1978, and the historiographical discussion by R. Meens, “The historiography of Early Medieval Penance”, in: A. Firey (ed.), *A New History of Penance*, Leiden 2003, pp. 73-96

³⁶ See T. Pollock-Oakley, “Les commutations et les rédemptions dans les pénitentiels du continent”, *Revue historique de droit français*, 18 (1939), pp. 39-57, and C. Vogel, “Composition legale et commutation dans le système de la pénitence tarifée”, *Revue de droit canonique*, essay in 3 parts in the issue 8 (1958), pp. 289-318, and 9 (1959), pp 1-39 and 341-359.