

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

A WORD STUDY OF ἀπολύτρωσις

IN COLOSSIANS 1:14

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In Colossians 1:14, the Apostle Paul uses a word that plays a significant role in the Christian's understanding of spiritual bondage and redemption. To express his message, Paul carefully chose ἀπολύτρωσις, which provides us with a vivid image of what it means to be spiritually rescued from sin. For this reason, it deserves our close attention. Much can be learned from this single word and its usage in the Greek text.

This word study will include a brief survey of historical usage, Scriptural usage, immediate contextual meaning, and exegetical significance. In thus manner, the paper will explore the meaning of ἀπολύτρωσις, as well as its exegetical significance in Colossians 1:14. More specifically, it will be argued that ἀπολύτρωσις connotes a release from slavery through payment and that its meaning in Colossians 1:14 is closely connected to forgiveness of sin and Christ's death on the cross.

### **Generic Usage of ἀπολύτρωσις (Historical/Diachronic)**

In terms of etymology, ἀπολύτρωσις is a derivation of λύω. Although used infrequently in non-biblical Greek, ἀπολύτρωσις referred to “the gift offered as ransom” or “ransom.”<sup>1</sup> As with the cognates, the range of meaning can also include “a release effected by payment of ransom,”<sup>2</sup> “redemption,” “deliverance,” or “liberation procured by the payment of a ransom.”<sup>3</sup> A less common usage, as seen in Philo and the book of Hebrews, implies a “release from a painful interrogation,” which is not too far removed from the more frequent definition.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kittel, G., and G. Friedrich, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 335.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas, R. L. *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated edition*. (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998), H8674.

<sup>3</sup> Strong, J. *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*. Electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), G629.

<sup>4</sup> Danker, Frederick William, ed. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 117.

Historically, ἀπολύτρωσις referred to the “‘buying back’ a slave or captive” or the “sacral manumission of slaves.”<sup>5</sup> Cognates such as λυτρον and λυτροω speak of the “price of release”<sup>6</sup> and “to free by paying ransom.”<sup>7</sup>

When Paul used ἀπολύτρωσις, it was within a context where slavery was commonplace.<sup>8</sup> Paul’s readers would have understood the term as used in social and economic life, so Paul uses that basis for his theological purposes. As it has been properly noted, “Among the Gks. a ransom was often paid to free slaves.”<sup>9</sup> For this reason, it would be unfair to ignore the social-cultural context of the word.<sup>10</sup> It is important to keep this in mind when interpreting ἀπολύτρωσις.

### **Scriptural Usage of ἀπολύτρωσις (Synchronic)**

In the LXX, ἀπολύτρωσις was used several times. In Exodus 21:8, for instance, the term was used “in connection to the gift offered as ransom.”<sup>11</sup> But according to Kittel, “the biblical sense of redemption, which became highly significant in the NT,” follows after the usage of the word in Daniel 4:34.<sup>12</sup> In this verse, the word clearly refers to redemption.

In the first century, ἀπολύτρωσις was used in Luke, Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, and Hebrews.<sup>13</sup> In nearly all cases (nine out of ten), the Biblical writers use the word to refer to redemption or the state of being redeemed. Variation from such a usage is minimal. An

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<sup>5</sup> BAGD, 117.

<sup>6</sup> BAGD, 605.

<sup>7</sup> BAGD, 606.

<sup>8</sup> du Toit, A.. *The New Testament Milieu*. (Halfway House: Orion), electronic ed.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Colin, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–1985), 180.

<sup>10</sup> As A.B. du Toit correctly stated, the New Testament documents were “concretely embedded in the milieu of the people who were involved in their production.”

<sup>11</sup> TDNT, 335.

<sup>12</sup> TDNT, 335.

<sup>13</sup> Rom 3:24, Heb 9:15, Heb 11:35, Luk 21:28, Rom 8:23, Eph 1:7, Col 1:14, Eph 4:30, Eph 1:14.

example of its common usage can be found in Hebrews 9:15, which speaks of redemption from transgressions committed.

In the context of Paul's letter to the Colossians, ἀπολύτρωσις is only used once, but it should be interpreted within the larger framework of his writing. It is a word primarily used at least 8 times by Paul. When Paul uses the word, he speaks of the redemption of our body (Rom 8:23), the redemption that is in Christ (Rom 3:24), and the day of redemption (Eph 4:30). It is a motif that he includes in at least 4 of his letters.

Without a doubt, in Pauline theology, redemption is an important concept. Paul's usage of ἀπολύτρωσις indicates that redemption is "a present reality" grounded in Christ. Yet at the same time, there is also a "future aspect" of redemption that will find its fulfillment in the second coming of Christ.<sup>14</sup> For this study, it is important to notice the connection that Paul makes between redemption and the work of Christ.

### **Meaning of ἀπολύτρωσις in Colossians**

In Colossians 1:14, nearly all English translations translate ἀπολύτρωσις as "redemption." A translator would be hard pressed to think of any other literal equivalent in English that would fairly reflect the original meaning.

Of the small number of English translations that do not use "redemption," however, the *New Living Translation* comes closest to the original meaning of the Greek with its translation of "purchased our freedom."<sup>15</sup> While *The Message*, on the other hand, loses the sense of payment with its paraphrase of "got us out of the pit we were in."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *NIDNTT*, 199.

<sup>15</sup> Tyndale House Publishers. *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers), Col. 1:14

<sup>16</sup> Peterson, E. H.. *The Message : The Bible in Contemporary Language*. (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress), Col. 1:14

Grammatically, the ideas of ἀπολύτρωσις and τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν are connected. Paul connects the ideas by placing both nouns in the accusative case, creating an apposition between the two words.<sup>17</sup> This is important so that we notice the connection (and possible equation) between redemption and the forgiveness of sin. It would be a mistake to see these as disconnected concepts.

### **Exegetical Significance of ἀπολύτρωσις**

It is significant to note that in Colossians 1:14 some textual variants have a lengthier text of “ἀπολύτρωσις δια του αιματος αυτου.”<sup>18</sup> This is why the King James Version translates the phrase as “redemption through His blood.” The extra words state the means through which the redemption is accomplished.

More reliable manuscripts suggest a preferred reading of ἀπολύτρωσις (without the insertion), and based upon textual critical methods, the shorter reading is to be preferred. This is significant because textual criticism suggests that the insertion of “δια του αιματος αυτου” was a *purposeful* adjustment of the text. In other words, at some point, a scribe added “through His blood” to clarify what was meant by “redemption.”

Therefore, textual criticism supports the definition put forth thus far. Early scribes considered ἀπολύτρωσις to communicate a sense of payment and attributed that payment to Christ’s blood. Furthermore, by connecting ἀπολύτρωσις to Christ’s death, ἀπολύτρωσις is then tied to the “forgiveness of sins” which immediately follows. The scribes believed that ἀπολύτρωσις was made possible because of Christ’s blood.

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<sup>17</sup> An appositional construction, as defined by Wallace, consists of the following: “(1) two adjacent substantives (2) in the same case, (3) which refer to the same person or thing, (4) and have the same syntactical relation to the rest of the clause.” Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 48.

<sup>18</sup> The lengthier variant is present in a Western manuscript (E), several Byzantine miniscule manuscripts (614.630.1505.2464), and in the writings of Cassiodorus. *Novum Testamentum Graece*. 27th ed. Edited by Constantin von Tischendorf, Caspar Rene Gregory and Ezra Abbot. (Lipsiae: Giesecke & Devrient, 1869-97), Col. 1:14

Of primary significance is the fact that we did not deliver ourselves. Our transition from darkness to light was due to Christ's action. We were not able to save ourselves because we were bound, and as this passage reminds us, we were fully dependent on outside help. As Calvin recognized, "All parts of our salvation are contained in Christ."<sup>19</sup>

This is emphasized by the use by ἀπολύτρωσις. Paul writes that we have redemption because of God's beloved Son – through no other means – and in so doing, Paul succinctly summarizes the gospel message. It is no wonder, then, why a scribe would have mentioned Christ's blood as the method of such redemption. Because Colossians 1:14 makes an important soteriological statement, the scribes did not want there to be any confusion.

## **Conclusion**

It cannot be underemphasized that ἀπολύτρωσις includes the idea of payment. In order for men and women to be delivered from darkness, a price had to be paid, and this passage makes clear that Christ was the one who paid the cost. Through His blood, the payment was made, and as a result, we were freed from darkness. The effect (forgiveness and release) was necessitated by horrific cost (the death of God's beloved Son). Only after Jesus paid the price could we enter into His kingdom.

In light of the historical and cultural usage of ἀπολύτρωσις, the grammatical choice of apposition, an important textual variant, we are able to interpret Colossians 1:4 with much greater clarity. As we rightly divide the word of truth, the reader becomes more aware of the underlying themes of slavery and payment, as well as redemption's connection to the forgiveness of sin. These truths can then be applied to our lives, leading towards greater understanding and appreciation for Christ's incredible grace towards us.

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<sup>19</sup> Calvin, John. *Calvin's Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 307.

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