

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Ransom theory in a new economy: Recontextualising a metaphor

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## Abstract

This article demonstrates that an economic context is essential to the metaphor that Anselm of Canterbury and Peter Abelard used in their arguments against a ransom theory of atonement. Contrary to typical analyses, which suggest their metaphor makes a point about obedience or honour that slaves or servants owe to a master or king, this metaphor in fact suggests relations between the lord of a manor and his *servi* – serfs bound to the land, perpetually indebted to the lord and effectively considered his property. Should *servi* attempt to desert their lord, he had the right simply to reclaim them wherever they went. Insofar as this right voided the *servus*' choice to leave their lord, the metaphorical framework of manorial economy ruled out the 'rights of the devil' in a way previous debt-slavery and military frameworks for ransom theory (in themselves) did not.

**Keywords:** Peter Abelard; Anselm of Canterbury; economy; manorialism; property; ransom theory

Overviews of soteriological models and developments often locate a decisive shift away from the idea of God justly redeeming humankind from the devil's possession sometime in the high to late Middle Ages. This key concept from what many today call 'ransom theory' had met earlier resistance from theologians such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Jerusalem, and John of Damascus, but it remained a staple of western theology well into the Middle Ages, due in part to Augustine's enduring influence. Its rejection, which would come to characterise most western theology from the early modern period to the present, is thus traced almost universally to Anselm's famous objection in *Cur Deus Homo* and to Abelard's *Romans* commentary shortly thereafter.<sup>1</sup> Both roundly rejected the idea that the devil had any rights over humankind that could limit God's options for fair play. Though he acted as a jailer or torturer by God's permission – as an agent of God's own justice – the devil could not rightfully *own* humankind. Thus Anselm's quip, 'what action did God need to take with, concerning, or in the case of, someone who was his own ... ? For they [the devil and humankind] were both thieves, since one was stealing his own person from his master at the

<sup>1</sup>Anselm's rejection of the received tradition was, of course, not adopted immediately, but together with Abelard's it came to prevail in the long run. See R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), p. 210; Marcia L. Colish, *Peter Lombard*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), pp. 450–1, 457–9.

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instigation of the other.<sup>2</sup> Or in Abelard's words, 'What right, even, could the devil have to possess a man ... ?'<sup>3</sup>

The imagery here is at least partly economic. God's rights, so to speak, are presented in terms that make humans (and the devil) God's property. However, this particular dimension of Anselm's and Abelard's famous arguments has not been thoroughly examined. Analyses of the theological and philosophical motives behind them abound: Anselm, for instance, has been presented variously as defending God's freedom, preserving the absolute distinction between creature and Creator and resisting a *de facto* dualism that had resulted from previous thinkers' mythologisation of the ransom metaphor.<sup>4</sup> Yet, few commentators dwell on the arguments' imagery or consider what it might reveal about the authors' thought. The few that do tend to trade on assertions about master–slave or king–servant relations and concomitant matters of honour or legal authority.<sup>5</sup> No study, as far as I am aware, has explored the economic context for the imagery and its significance for how the imagery functions.

This essay offers such an exploration as a modest contribution to the study of ransom theory's reception and of high medieval soteriology. As I will submit, the essential context for understanding Anselm's and Abelard's remarks on ransom theory is the manorial (or seigneurial) economic relationship between the lord of a manor (not a king) and *servi* (understood not as slaves or servants in general, but as a particular type of landholding serf), in which the latter owe a perpetual debt to the former that secures their position as his property and gives the lord a right simply to reclaim fugitive *servi* wherever they go. By casting humans and the devil as God's *servi* and granting God the inalienable right of a lord to reclaim fugitive *servi*, Anselm and Abelard ruled out the 'rights of the devil' in a way that previous debt-slavery and military frameworks for ransom theory in and of themselves did not: by rendering humanity's choice of another master utterly void.

The argument proceeds in four parts. First, I examine manorialism in the Norman England and Northern France of Anselm's and Abelard's day. I then demonstrate the coherence of Anselm's argument with manorial property relations, followed by that of Abelard's, detailing how manorialism informs each. Finally, I show the impact of the manorial metaphor by distinguishing it both from the feudal relations with

<sup>2</sup>*Cur Deus Homo* (hereafter CDH, with citations in-line), 1.7. All references use Janet Fairweather's translation in *Anselm: The Major Works* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), altering it where necessary only by substituting the original Latin.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Steven R. Cartwright (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), p. 165.

<sup>4</sup>For freedom, see Ben Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), p. 49; for creation, see Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St Anselm* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), p. 189; and William P. Loewe, *Lex Crucis: Soteriology and the Stages of Meaning* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), p. 77; for resisting dualism, see Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 87–9.

<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), p. 170; H. Lawrence Bond, 'Another Look at Abelard's Commentary on Romans 3:26', in William S. Campbell, Peter S. Hawkins, and Brenda Deen Schildgen (eds.), *Medieval Readings of Romans* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2007), p. 14; C. W. Marx, *The Devil's Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 21–2; Richard E. Weingart, *The Logic of Divine Love: A Critical Analysis of the Soteriology of Peter Abailard* (London: Clarendon, 1970), p. 86.

which it has been confused and from previous metaphorical frameworks for ransom theory, and by briefly noting the metaphor's influence on Bernard of Clairvaux.

### Manorial/seigneurial economy

Given the diverse and fragmented nature of high medieval Europe, one cannot flatten eleventh- and twelfth-century economic arrangements into a single economic 'system'. Parts of Europe functioned without a lord's manor house at the centre, and even within manorial arrangements the details of economic and social organisation varied between regions, not to mention between manors.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, a general pattern prevailed throughout much of high medieval Europe in which daily economic life for most people was built on relations between those who *had* land and those who *held* land.

Such economic relations in Norman England are represented in the 1087 Domesday Book, which grouped the population into about fifteen classes, several of which exhibited varying degrees of servile tenure on a noble or ecclesiastical lord's land.<sup>7</sup> Chattel slavery at the time was close to non-existent in Normandy and on its last leg in Norman England. However, the Domesday Book categorised over 70 per cent of England's population as 'bordars', 'cottars' or 'villeins' – serf classes that depended on a local lord to whom they owed heavy rent. Bound to the land, these serfs were considered assets of the estate on which they lived, such that, in the words of Rosamond Faith, '[t]here is a very real sense in which even those who were not slaves came to be regarded as the personal property of their lord'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in the twelfth century, legislation cemented the rights of lords upon those tied to the land so that they could reclaim any serfs who might turn fugitive.<sup>9</sup> In short, these serfs were the lord's property due to no choice of their own and were allowed to subsist on the lord's land in exchange for rent, typically in the form of labour.<sup>10</sup>

Though the names of subservient classes and their precise responsibilities differed, such arrangements also prevailed in Abelard's twelfth-century France, making much of the labouring population the *de facto* property of landowners. Marc Bloch documented this relation by noting a shift in the use of the term *servus* in *langue d'oïl* France: by the late tenth century, *servus* and *servi* were used to refer not to slaves but to serfs under seigneurial systems. No longer were *servi* property in the chattel sense (they now had at least some limited legal rights), but they remained dependent, servile to a seigneur and tied to his land.<sup>11</sup> As in Norman England, this land served primarily

<sup>6</sup>For examples of such variations, see Richard Britnell, *Britain and Ireland 1050–1530: Economy and Society* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 223–47.

<sup>7</sup>For an accessible presentation of this data, see the population tables in H. C. Darby, *Domesday England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), pp. 338–45.

<sup>8</sup>Rosamond Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), p. 84.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 249–50.

<sup>10</sup>As Britnell (*Britain and Ireland*, pp. 235–37) notes, landlords from 1050 to 1300 increasingly required money when it suited them. Labour and produce, however, appear to have been more common forms of rent in the late eleventh century.

<sup>11</sup>Marc Bloch, *Slavery and Serfdom in the Middle Ages*, trans. William R. Beer (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 33–6. Much additional work on serfdom in medieval France has followed Bloch's, questioning the nature and timeline of the transition from antique slavery to serfdom and drawing attention to more precise distinctions between various types of serfs (among other things). These developments notwithstanding, the existence of dependent labourers tied to the land of a *seigneur* remains universally recognised, and Bloch's work in this area remains influential. For an excellent engagement with the

to provide for the lord, and unfree people who held the land were considered property. In the words of one abbot from Vézelay concerning one of his serfs, 'he is mine from the soles of his feet to the top of his head'.<sup>12</sup> For the same reason, lords in northern France could also reclaim a fugitive serf no matter where that serf went.<sup>13</sup>

### Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*

Such economic arrangements shaped Anselm's daily experience, not simply because manorialism obtained throughout most of high medieval Europe, but also because Anselm himself held a fair share of manorial authority as the abbot of Bec (in Normandy) and then as archbishop of Canterbury (in Norman England). In both roles, Anselm would have been responsible for the operations of his abbey's estate, though he likely delegated administrative duties to other officials.<sup>14</sup> One can thus expect the workings of manorial economy to impact his thought, at least insofar as this economy was part of the water in which he swam.

Indeed, the method Anselm adopts in *Cur Deus Homo* primes him to draw explicitly from such water – that is, features of high medieval life that were widely taken for granted. Anselm sought not only to enrich the contemplation of fellow monastics but to prepare them 'to give satisfaction to all who ask the reason for the hope that is in us' (*CDH* 1.1), and he introduces the work's first book as 'contain[ing] the objections of unbelievers who reject the Christian faith because they think it militates against reason' (*CDH* preface). Recent scholarship has taken these statements increasingly seriously, arguing that *Cur Deus Homo* truly intended at least in part to teach effective apologetic responses to non-Christians Anselm had encountered, and that this purpose shaped Anselm's argument in significant ways.<sup>15</sup> In his own famous phrasing, for instance, Anselm proceeds *remoto christo* or 'supposing Christ were left out of the case' (*CDH* preface). Thus, although monotheistic logic – of the most general sort shared by the medieval Latin West, Jews, Muslims and Greek philosophy – remains throughout *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm refused to use revealed details of Christ and the incarnation as premises so that unbelievers could not reject his arguments out of hand.<sup>16</sup>

This intent appears clearly in Anselm's rejection of ransom theory in *Cur Deus Homo* 1.6–7. The heart of his objection is a resistance to the notion that the devil had any real rights over humankind – which Anselm presents as a stumbling block to unbelievers who found it inconsistent with Christian claims about God's

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relevant secondary literature, see Dominique Barthélemy, *The Serf, the Knight, and the Historian*, trans. Graham Robert Edwards (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 68–136.

<sup>12</sup>Bloch, *Slavery and Serfdom*, p. 58.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 60–61. Practical difficulties certainly attended the exercise of this principle in some cases. For the present purposes, it is the principle, well established in studies of seigneurialism, that matters.

<sup>14</sup>Indeed, the Domesday Book lists the archbishop as the lord of Canterbury and reports the same sort of demographic data as it did for nobles' estates, numbering the population of villeins and other serf groups.

<sup>15</sup>Which non-Christians remains subject to widespread debate, with conclusions ranging from Jews and Muslims to doubting Christians or schismatics. See, for instance, F. B. A. Asiedu, 'Anselm and the Unbelievers: Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the *Cur Deus Homo*', *Theological Studies* 62/3 (2001), pp. 530–48; David S. Hogg, 'Christology: The *Cur Deus Homo*', in Francesca Murphy (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 208–11; Anna Sapir Abulafia, 'St Anselm and Those Outside the Church', in David M. Loades and Katherine Walsh (eds), *Faith and Identity: Christian Political Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>16</sup>Eileen C. Sweeney, *Anselm of Canterbury and the Desire for the Word* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), p. 280.

omnipotence, wisdom and creation of all things by command. Anselm then offers four reasons, at least three of which do not depend on Christian teaching, to reject ransom theory and thereby respond to such objections. First, the devil cannot justly hold humans captive, for he unjustly stole them from their rightful master; second, the devil's punishment of humankind is not just (even though humans deserve justly to be punished) because he punishes out of malice rather than a love of justice; third – where Anselm appears to lapse briefly into uniquely Christian argumentation – the bond against humans cited in Colossians 2:14 comes not from the devil but from God; and fourth, just as there is no injustice in a good angel, there is no justice in a bad one (CDH 1.7).<sup>17</sup>

The logic driving the opening argument is clearly economic. Anselm acknowledges that one could perhaps speak of God needing to make a payment to the devil in order to free humanity justly – *if* 'the devil, or man, were his own master, or belonged to someone other than God, or was permanently in the power of someone other than God'. However, 'neither the devil nor man belongs to anyone but God, and ... neither stands outside God's power' (CDH 1.7). Thus, although Anselm retains some sense in which humanity is captive to the devil – humanity was conquered by the devil, and God allows the devil to administer the punishment humanity deserves – he does not conceive of the devil as humankind's master or owner. Undoubtedly, one could find theological recourse to justify this perspective within the ambit of medieval European monotheism.<sup>18</sup> But Anselm makes no such appeal. Instead, he offers this explanation, which is worth quoting at length:

what action did God need to take with, concerning, or in the case of, someone who was his own, apart from punishing this *servus* of his who had persuaded his fellow-*servus* to desert his master and come over to join him, and had treacherously taken in the fugitive and, a thief himself, had received a thief along with the stolen property of his master? For they were both thieves, since one was stealing his own person from his master at the instigation of the other.<sup>19</sup>

In this argument, humans and the devil are both considered property, God is the master of this property, human flight from God is presented as fugitivity and God holds the inalienable right simply to reclaim God's fugitive property – features which together comprise an unmistakably manorial picture of the relations between a lord and his serf or villein (either of which would be a viable translation for *servus* in the late eleventh century).

The significance of Anselm's choosing this economic framework becomes particularly clear when juxtaposed with another that influenced the received ransom tradition: the redemption of debt slaves. Proponents of ransom theory of course interpreted the biblical language of ransom and redemption in a variety of ways (to which I will return later), but in this prominent line of interpretation, Christ frees humanity from debt

<sup>17</sup>I count Anselm's third reason as specifically Christian because it appears to function as a sort of theological interpretation: Anselm argues that the 'bond of the decree' must be a bond owed to God because the decree must be a decree by God's just judgment. As C. W. Marx has noted, this argument challenges a traditional reading of the verse employed by figures such as Leo the Great. See Marx, *Devil's Rights*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup>One might appeal, for instance, to a basic doctrine of creation – God need not transact with the devil, for the devil is God's creature – as does Hopkins, *St Anselm*, p. 189.

<sup>19</sup>Anselm, CDH, 1.7.

slavery to the devil by buying humanity back.<sup>20</sup> Origen of Alexandria makes such an idea explicit in a homily on Exodus 15 when he explains that humans, by sinning, received the money of Satan and in so doing were bought as the devil's slaves.<sup>21</sup> With his blood Christ paid the price required for their release. Albeit with modifications and additions, this line of interpretation continued in figures such as Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine.<sup>22</sup> In the words of the latter: 'it is certainly just that the debtors, whom he [the devil] held, should be set free, since they believed in Him whom he slew without any debt'. Since only dying can free one from the debt of death, Christ proceeds 'to His passion, in order that He might pay for us, the debtors, that which He Himself did not owe'.<sup>23</sup> As Devin Singh has emphasised, debt slavery provides more than an evocative image in such accounts: though the devil remains a tyrant, humanity's initial fall into slavery is considered just in the same way ordinary debt slavery was considered just, and God redeems through a just counter-process.<sup>24</sup> Though deceived, humankind chose to sell itself; because it would be unjust simply to take such a slave from its master without payment, God redeems humankind by paying the ransom price.<sup>25</sup>

In both this debt-slavery scenario and Anselm's manorial one, humankind occupies a position construed more or less as property, but whether or not God must render the devil payment is determined by what sort of property humans are. To this end, Anselm's manorial economic framework entails two key differences. First, whereas the logic of debt slavery grants the devil rights over those he enslaved by virtue of their choice to sell themselves, Anselm's manorial economy allows no such sale; human property is already tied inextricably to one lord's estate, such that the lord can rightfully reclaim such property wherever it goes unless *he* decides to release it. The property's 'choice' of a new master is null and void. (Thus Anselm's suggestion that there is no sense in drawing attention to human free will in the fall.) Second, Anselm locates the devil himself in a different social position: rather than another potential master, the devil himself is a *servus* – which closes off any remaining potential for his possessing humankind.<sup>26</sup> Even if God approved a transfer of God's *servi*, the devil's own status as property made him categorically unable to own another *servus*.

<sup>20</sup>For prominent patristic variations on ransom theory, see Eugene TeSelle, 'The Cross as Ransom', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4/2 (1996), pp. 147–70; note also the medieval variations on the 'rights of the devil' documented by Colish, *Peter Lombard*, pp. 455–9.

<sup>21</sup>*Exodus Homily* VI.9; compare *Genesis Homily* XIII.4.

<sup>22</sup>For Nyssen's treatment, see his *Address on Religious Instruction* §§20–6.

<sup>23</sup>Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 13.14.18. In some articulations of this process, this payment secures humankind's freedom; in others, Satan's killing Christ overreaches his rights on humankind (because of Christ's concealed divinity, his sinlessness, or both) and by this injustice loses his just claim over the rest of humanity. At different times, Augustine uses both versions. The latter appears to have been more influential upon Gregory the Great's seminal *Moralia in Job* and the sententia of Ralph of Laon that Anselm appears to quote.

<sup>24</sup>Devin Singh, *Divine Currency: The Theological Power of Money in the West* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), pp. 132–65, esp. 145–55.

<sup>25</sup>For Singh, the importance of debt slavery for justifying humanity's bondage and God's method of redemption is clearest in Nyssen's explanation in *Address* 22 that '[e]ven as those who have sold their own liberty for a price are justly slaves of those that bought them, [so] it is not right for them or for anybody else to claim liberty on their behalf'. Singh, *Divine Currency*, p. 154.

<sup>26</sup>This element of Anselm's logic carries into his proposed picture of redemption: though God in Christ ultimately conquers the devil, this conquest is discussed in terms of Christ's humanity rather than his divinity. To defeat the devil is to resist his temptations to sin (humanity's task), and it is humankind, not God, that must conquer the devil (which paints him primarily as humanity's enemy; *CDH* 1.22). In these ways,

This is not to say Anselm thought of the received ransom tradition as based on a false economy or the wrong economy, humanly speaking. Neither did he lack theological motives to reject the idea of the devil justly possessing humankind. However, economy and theology alike shape the imagination, and Anselm's methodology clears space for an explicit mixture of theological and economic reasoning. As Anselm attempted to address the concerns of unbelievers about Christian beliefs, the manorial lord's ownership of serfs – something widely understood and taken for granted regardless of religious belief – offered a common-sense analogue, making it a natural ally for his task.

### Abelard's Romans commentary

Though writing in a different context and for a different purpose, Abelard makes a similar move as he rejects ransom theory in his *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, which dates to his time teaching in Paris at the school of Sainte Geneviève. Likely written for young clerics at this school, the commentary follows a mix of traditional and novel expository methods. On the one hand, Abelard frequently draws from medieval and patristic theological tradition, and he uses long-standing techniques for interpreting scripture. On the other hand, he uses dialectics much more prominently than did his contemporaries.<sup>27</sup> Abelard also interjects into his commentary dozens of *quaestiones*, many of which included dialectical reasoning, at points where the biblical text may be seen as unclear or where students had raised questions.<sup>28</sup> These methods yield a result similar to Anselm's insofar as they make room for reasoning not limited to scriptural evidence or theological tradition – perhaps even more so than did Anselm. Peter Cartwright observes that, at times, 'morality has as much force as logic', for instance.<sup>29</sup> Dialectical reasoning, further, often serves to deny received interpretations and doctrinal claims. Young clerics were to do the same when necessary, using critical thinking and common sense to navigate between true and false Christian teaching.

Abelard does just this in the famous *quaestio* following Romans 3:26, where he rejects ransom theory. After commenting on the meaning of the phrase 'him who by faith belongs to Jesus Christ', Abelard introduces the 'greatest question in the passage, namely, what is that redemption of ours through the death of Christ?'<sup>30</sup> His response to this question then takes *redemptio* literally as buying back and contemplates from whom God redeemed humankind and 'with what justice [God] freed us from that one's power, or if you will, what price did he give which the other wished to receive'.<sup>31</sup> 'It is said' introduces a notion of ransom passed down from patristic theology: God bought humankind back from the devil, who owned humankind because Adam voluntarily subjected himself to the devil by obeying him, thereby giving the devil rights over all future generations. Abelard then introduces a series of objections to the received doctrine through repeated questioning. First, the devil could not torment the elect; second,

too, the devil for Anselm is no challenger to God. The issue for God regarding the devil is rather humanity's failure to defeat him.

<sup>27</sup>Steven R. Cartwright, 'Introduction', in Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup>Using *quaestiones* was not itself a novum, but the sort of dialectical reasoning Abelard employs differentiates his use of *quaestiones* from that of others. G. R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), pp. 126–7.

<sup>29</sup>Cartwright, 'Introduction', p. 31.

<sup>30</sup>Abelard, *Romans*, p. 164. As with *CDH*, I alter the translation only to reinsert the original Latin where relevant.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

the deserting of God by God's *servi* does not negate God's rights simply to reclaim them; third, the devil deserves punishment rather than rights over humankind for leading them astray; fourth, the devil cannot fulfil the promise of immortality he offered in exchange for humanity's obedience before the fall; and fifth, since humanity sinned only against God, all that is needed to redeem humanity is God's forgiveness.

Unlike Anselm, Abelard makes no attempt to argue *remoto christo*. Scriptural reasoning and Christian theological concepts prove crucial in Abelard's first point, which is based on Luke 16:19–26 (namely, how could the devil hold absolute power over someone on the other side of the abyss between the elect and the reprobate if scripture says that none can cross it?).<sup>32</sup> However, much of Abelard's argument, including his claims about divine necessity, rests on the same manorial metaphor Anselm employed. Abelard refers to humankind as *iniqui servi* almost immediately in articulating the 'greatest question', and he follows his suggestion that the devil could possess humankind only by God's permission with the question 'if a *servus* wished to desert his lord and subject himself to the control of another, is he permitted to do this, so that the [original] lord may not seek him and bring him back by right?'<sup>33</sup> These references to fugitivity and the lord's rights, as well as the virtual absence of slavery from Northern France at this time, make clear that Abelard is referring to serfs rather than slaves with the term *servi/servus* and is thinking in terms of manorial economy, which predominated in France as in Norman England.

These terms inform at least three of Abelard's five objections and ultimately the adjustment he makes to the devil's role. In the second objection (quoted above), the right of lords over *servi* as property tied to their manors invalidates any claims the devil might have over humans based on their wilful choice. The lord's right to reclaim his property remains in perpetuity and allows him simply to bring deserters back; God, as lord over humankind, must similarly be able to reclaim those who desert God, without any additional requirements. Abelard's third objection then casts the devil as another *servus*: 'Who doubts that if the *servus* of a certain lord should lead his fellow-servant astray with his persuasions and cause him to turn away from obedience to his own lord, how much more should the one leading astray be accused before his lord than the one led?'<sup>34</sup> Unlike in the debt-slavery version of ransom theory that holds humanity chiefly responsible for freely choosing to sin, here the devil's deception deserves the determinative fault, being much worse than humankind's sin. Leading another *servus* to violate the obedience owed to the manorial lord cannot be justified by the free choice of the one led astray because of the latter's status as property. One serf might be given a degree of authority over the other, but 'by no means would it be proper' for this authority to be given to the deceiving *servus*.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, per Abelard's fifth objection to ransom theory, if the disobedience of humankind is only against its lord, then this lord can punish or forgive at will – which indeed Jesus did (even before his crucifixion) for the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the paralytic of Matthew 9:2. Finally, in Abelard's adjustment, whatever ability the devil has to torment humanity can only be that allowed by the lord 'who handed man over to the devil for punishment as if to a jailer or torturer'.<sup>36</sup> Because such punishment requires permission from the lord,

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 164–5.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.



reclaiming and thus redeeming humanity from the jailer entails no possibility of injustice to the devil.

In these ways, Abelard's objection to ransom theory, much like Anselm's, reconceived redemption largely based on manorial economy's capacity to map relations between humanity, God, and the devil. Abelard does not use Anselm's language of theft, but again humankind becomes the sort of property a *servus* would be under manorialism. Again, the devil himself becomes a *servus*. And again, this economic framework nullifies any possibility of the devil holding legitimate rights over humankind (for even more reasons than Anselm gives). Though now within a Christian theological attempt to evaluate Christian teachings rather than a demonstration of the reasonableness of Christian doctrine, manorial economic reasoning serves this specific theological purpose for Abelard as well as for Anselm.

### The impact of the metaphor

Connecting Anselm's and Abelard's imagery to manorial property relations highlights an important way in which each thinker's theology was impacted by daily economic life – a dimension of their historical contexts to which modern theology has typically given little attention (if not overlooked entirely), favouring instead more-familiar features of their contexts such as honour and tutelage.<sup>37</sup> It bears emphasising, however, that the manorial reference Anselm and Abelard used in rejecting ransom theory differs from these features in significant ways. Since humans and the devil are cast as *servi*, the primary issue that Anselm's and Abelard's metaphor foregrounds cannot be obedience or the display of honour. For the moment, at least, the Lord of lords is cast not as a king to honour and obey but as the lord of a manor who retains rights to his property. High medieval concepts of honour obviously remain influential on the theologians' respective works. However, the property relations of manorial economy served a theological function honour did not: emphasising that the devil can in no sense rightfully possess humankind, *regardless of humankind's choice*. To take the terms of the metaphor literally, so much is true not because God's servants owe God honour and obedience but because no action by any other party can invalidate God's ownership of human *servi*.

Indeed, previous metaphorical frameworks for ransom theory could not refute the devil's rights on their own. This applies not only to the debt-slavery model considered above but also to military and political frameworks popular in medieval accounts of redemption by ransom. As R. W. Southern explains, many such accounts presented sin and redemption as functioning in ways similar to the feudal practice of *diffidatio* whereby vassals might renounce allegiance to one overlord in favour of another. By

<sup>37</sup>This is particularly true for the study of *CDH*. Since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, Anselm's thought has been decried for its reliance on 'feudal' logic, though this purported feudal influence has increasingly been called into question since John McIntyre's *St Anselm and his Critics: A Re-Interpretation of the Cur Deus Homo* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1954), with many interpreters now favoring monastic concepts from Benedict's *Rule* as the true influences on Anselm's thought. (See David L. Whidden III, 'The Alleged Feudalism of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* and the Benedictine Concepts of Obedience, Honor, and Order', *Nova et Vetera, English Edition* 9/4 (2011), pp. 1055–87.) The present article's findings corroborate claims for the impact of Anselm's monastic life on his theology, though in a more holistic way that exceeds relationships between an abbot and the religious under his care, bringing Anselm's administrative responsibilities into the picture, as well. As abbot and then archbishop, Anselm was not only a father to monks but also an ecclesiastical lord to *servi* on an estate; both positions impacted his understanding of 'why God became human'.

sinning, humans voluntarily withdrew themselves from the service of God and submitted to the devil instead.

[God] did not acquiesce to this state of affairs; it meant war – but still, the rules of *diffidatio* having been observed, the war must be fought according to the rules ... The command over Man [*sic*] which the Devil had acquired by a voluntary cessation, could only be lost in one of two ways: either Man could go back on his choice and voluntarily turn again to God; or the Devil could himself forfeit his claim by abusing his power and breaking the rules by which he held mankind in fee. But Man's tragedy consisted precisely in the impossibility of a voluntary return.<sup>38</sup>

In this framework, much like that of selling oneself into debt slavery, humanity's rank allows for human choice to justify the devil's claim. If humans are vassals owing honour and allegiance to an overlord, there is a precedent upon which they may reject this overlord's authority and submit to another, in which case the original overlord must reclaim his subjects by a just counter-process. As *servi* tied to a manor, however, humans owe a debt to God in perpetuity and must work the land to pay it, with no possibility for escape or transfer to another's service apart from God's consent. The specific relations of lord and serf that characterise manorialism are thus integral to the point Anselm and Abelard are making. Manorial ownership closed off all possibilities for the devil to have rights rooted in the decision of any party other than God.

This metaphorical shift is not limited to Anselm and Abelard. Even Bernard of Clairvaux, who maintained that God redeemed humanity from the devil's possession, conceded God's absolute ownership as manorial lord in his vehement letter to Pope Innocent condemning Abelard. Here Bernard took issue with several of Abelard's key teachings, as well as his theological method on the whole, presenting Abelard as a 'new theologian' who gave imbalanced attention to dialectics and scrutinised mysteries of the faith (such as the redemption) that should not be subjected to scrutiny (Letter 190, 1.1–2).<sup>39</sup> Against Abelard's claim that the devil had no power over humans except by God's permission, Bernard deployed a series of scriptural quotations proving the devil indeed held just power over humankind from which the Son came to free us by purchasing our redemption. Yet Bernard conceded that the devil's *will* was not just, 'but the Lord is just, who permitted the subjection' (Letter 190, 5.14). It has been widely observed that in this way Bernard's ransom theory differs from that of many patristic writers. In fact, he stated plainly that God *could* have simply reclaimed humanity from the devil by right without any injustice (*injuria*) to the devil (Letter 190, 8.19). That God chose this method of redemption over another is a mystery one must simply accept. By granting this possibility, as C. W. Marx observes, Bernard departed from the 'old formula' in which the devil held a right of possession over humankind – much like Anselm and Abelard did.<sup>40</sup> In fact, as Bernard later scoffed,

<sup>38</sup>R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London: Arrow Books, 1959), pp. 234–5.

<sup>39</sup>See Constant J. Mews, 'Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard', in Brian Patrick McGuire (ed.), *A Companion to Bernard of Clairvaux* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 143. Citations of Bernard's letter follow the translation and chapter and paragraph numbering from Bernard of Clairvaux, 'Letter 190 To the Same, Against Certain Heads of Abaelard's Heresies', in *Life and Works of Saint Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux*, ed. John Mabillon, trans. Samuel J. Eales (London: Burns & Oates, 1889), pp. 656–91.

<sup>40</sup>Marx, *Devil's Rights*, p. 23.

[Abelard] labors to teach and persuade us that the devil could not and ought not to have claimed for himself any right over man, except by the permission of God, and that, without doing any injustice to the devil, God could have called back his deserter,<sup>41</sup> if He wished to show him mercy, and have rescued him by a word only, *as though anyone denies this*. (Letter 190, 8.19, emphasis added)

For an abbot in northern France, this imagery could only suggest the rights of a manorial lord over his *servi*. Like Anselm and Abelard, Bernard speaks of fugitivity and God's prerogative simply to reclaim deserters. Although he would not allow the logic of such human relations to warrant rejecting (his understanding of) doctrinal tradition regarding ransom theory, Bernard apparently found at least this bit of manorial reasoning perfectly fitting. Strikingly, then, the metaphor's influence spanned both the rejection and the defence of the idea that God redeemed humankind by paying the devil.

The evidence I have submitted above shows that Anselm's and Abelard's arguments (not to mention Bernard's) about the devil's rights are not fully understood until the economic contexts for their metaphors are recognised. Both theologians evaluated traditional teachings on the redemption by casting humankind as *servi* – people who held land to which they were tied in exchange for rent. This economic arrangement and its capacity for metaphorical use in turn funded arguments against ransom theory that other metaphors could not in and of themselves sustain. In short, manorial economy helped Anselm and Abelard critique the received tradition on redemption by stressing God's incontestable ownership of humankind. Ransom theory simply could not persist in this new economy.

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<sup>41</sup>Marx translates this phrase 'God was able, by right, to seek after and by a single word to take back his own fugitive'. Ibid.