

## On Salvation and Redemption

[Published in the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, December 21, 2020, p. 9.]

### Jewish Reflections as Christians Celebrate the Nativity

by Abraham Skorka

Among the concepts in the Bible that are central to the faiths of both Israel and Christianity are redemption (*geulah*) and salvation (*yeshuah*). While often the two terms are casually used interchangeably, there are certain distinctions worth noting in the Jewish tradition. While salvation refers to the liberation of a human being from the oppression inflicted on him or her by another (Exodus 14:13; Psalm 14:7), or an oppression inherent in the drama of the human condition (Psalm 62:2), redemption seems to allude to a return to an ideal past situation that was impaired or lost. In Leviticus 25, the word *geulah* is applied to the return or redemption of property to its original owners. This would re-establish the Hebrew vision of an ideal society in which land or property was equitably divided among families so as to make them self-sufficient.

In Jewish understanding, redemption, although it ultimately comes from God, requires the collaborative efforts of God and humanity. God revealed to Moses the divine intention to redeem the Children of Israel from Egypt and restore their freedom (Exodus 6: 6), but this plan would require Moses to encourage the Hebrew people to leave the land of their enslavement.

In contrast, salvation is a revelation or deed of the Creator in which the Jew must place his or her faith and hope. The Talmud (b. Shabbat 31, a) describes six questions that the heavenly tribunal asks each Jew who has died. One of them is: did you believe and wait for God's salvation? Note that salvation must be awaited, while redemption must be actively pursued.

The concept of an anointed messiah to advance God's plans is also relevant here. In some Jewish interpretations, Isaiah 11 is the first time in which the idea of a future messiah appears in the Bible in reference to a king of Israel. This individual is envisioned as a descendant of David who will reign in a time of justice and universal knowledge of God. In the following chapter, Isaiah speaks about salvation. In these passages can be seen the intimate relationship between the two words *mashiach* and *yeshuah* (messiah and salvation).

Over time, messianic thinking became linked to the interpretation of both salvation and redemption. It was discussed within Judaism both before and after the time of Jesus. Some passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls refer to multiple messiahs (e.g., 1QS 9.10-11), and a unique fragment seems to refer to a messiah raising the dead (4Q521). The Talmud presents different opinions about the coming of this figure (b. Sanhedrin 98, b).

As Christians begin preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, it might be good to recall that his name undoubtedly derives from *Yeshuah*, meaning "God saves" or "God save!" and that it has messianic connotations. Indeed, over the centuries, the question of whether the Messiah had already come or was still awaited divided Jews and Christians into antagonistic camps. Barriers of misunderstanding were erected. Political, economic, and social factors promoted a relationship of animosity between them with the result that there really was little incentive to seek the path of dialogue, where only the love of God and the human person should be found, even in disagreement.

In our time, as Pope Francis has said, a new "journey of friendship" between both communities has begun thanks to *Nostra Aetate* and the continuing efforts of all those who labor to transform that document into a living reality.

We can now learn from each other that, in their different ways, Jews and Christians both await the fullness of salvation for all of creation. From the Jewish perspective, the concept of "redemption" demands and compels us both to work together to correct, with the help of the Eternal, that which has gone astray. Surely, the current global pandemic, economic crises, widespread racism and divisiveness, and rampant hunger and homelessness all demand that we seek to "redeem" the situation, to labor to restore the world to God's intentions for it. In this understanding of the process of redemption, human beings have an active role, because according to the Sages, by acting with justice and righteousness they become God's partner in completing the creation of the cosmos (b. Shabbat 10, a; 119, b).

Although as a Jew I do not share the church's convictions about Jesus Christ, I pray that the celebration of his Nativity might inspire an active, redemptive spirituality that contributes to the mending of the world. To our Christian brothers and sisters, sincere wishes for a *buon Natale*!