

SALVATION IN JEWISH THOUGHT

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Note: "Bible" and "biblical" in this paper refer to the Hebrew Scriptures ("Old Testament") only. BCE and CE are used in preference to BC and AD.

Judaism and Christianity are divided by a common language. This is strikingly evident in the case of words like "salvation", "redemption" and the related "Messiah". Both Jews and Christians frequently use these words, derived from the Hebrew scriptures to which they both look as their foundation, but they do not use them in quite the same way. Not only do the semantic fields differ as between Judaism and Christianity; the *weight* attributed to the associated concepts differs too.

Christians, of course, vary in their theologies, but for most "salvation" is a key word, used to combine in different measure any or all of several overlapping concepts, such as: atonement through sacrifice; vicarious atonement through Jesus; forgiveness of sin; delivery from 'burden' of sin, or of 'the Law'; beginning of new 'people of Christ'; overcoming of death, which is the consequence of sin; renewed life filled with spirit, peace, freedom, holiness; attainment of eternal bliss through faith; process of cosmic redemption.

Jews too vary in their theologies. Most use "salvation" or a Hebrew equivalent in a restricted sense, and it carries less weight for them than it does for Christians. "Salvation" defines what Christianity is about, but it does not define Judaism. Likewise, the term "Messiah" certainly carries significance in most varieties of Judaism, but it is not clearly defined, nor does it occupy the central place that "Torah" does.

We shall see that much of what Christian theology incorporates under the heading of salvation – though not the connection with Jesus – is conveyed in Judaism by different terms.

The Hebrew Scriptures

Words for "save"

The three-lettered Hebrew root **נשׁוּׁ** **יָצַׁׁ** ("save"), in its many forms, occurs frequently throughout the Bible. It carries no particular theological load; it simply means "to save from", or "rescue", as in common English usage. Of course, there are many different things one might hope to be saved from. In the national context, it means to be saved from defeat or oppression. For instance:

Save Israel from the hand of Midian (Judges 6:14)

He will save my people from the hand of the Philistines (1 Sam 9:16)

Hope of Israel, its saviour in time of trouble (Jeremiah 14:8)

Biblical writers generally hold that if the nation, Israel, is in distress it is because they have sinned. They must repent; God stands ready to forgive, and will then "save" them, that is, deliver them from their enemies. Penitence, *teshuva* ("turning to God"), is essential; "save us", however, does not mean "forgive us", for which there are several perfectly good Hebrew words, but simply "get us out of this mess".

12); the day of the Lord (Joel 3:4; Amos 5:18); the ingathering of the exiles (Isaiah 27:13; Ezekiel 37:21); the regeneration of the nation and renewal of the covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-40; Ezekiel 37); the unity of peoples in the name of God (Zechariah 14:9); the golden age with its rule of peace (Isaiah 11). Zechariah (9:15) combines a few of these elements:

Lo your king is coming to you. He is victorious, triumphant, Yet humble, mounted on an ass ... He shall banish chariots from Ephraim and horses from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow shall be banished. He shall call on the nations to make peace, and his rule shall extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

However, the word “Messiah” does not figure in that prophecy, nor does “son of David” or “day of the Lord”; moreover, it is not the king who is said to “save” Israel (v. 16), but “the Lord their God” – and there is no confusion between the two. Moreover, such messianic fragments as are present in the Hebrew scriptures are largely confined to a few chapters of the prophetic writings, and most biblical books are not prophecies.

Far from “Messiah” (as later understood) being a guiding notion, the Hebrew scriptures give voice to at least three ‘philosophies of history’:

1. Nothing changes. This attitude is most common in the wisdom literature, such as *Job* and *Proverbs*, and is well summed up in *Ecclesiastes* 1:9: “What has happened will happen again, and what has been done will be done again, and there is nothing new under the sun”. There could hardly be a greater contrast with messianism.
2. History is cyclical. This is evident in the “Deuteronomic cycle”, consistently applied from Deuteronomy to the end of Kings: repeatedly (a) people are faithless to the covenant, (b) God subjects them to the power of their enemies, (c) they turn back to God and cry out to Him (d) He sends them a leader to save them. No end to such cycles is promised or threatened – there is *no eschatology*.
3. History is linear. There may be cycles, but one day – at the “end of time” - they will cease. History moves towards an end (*eschaton*) determined by God, involving a final ‘redemption’. This is the view adopted by some prophets and in the apocalyptic section of *Daniel*.³

The tension between the Deuteronomic and messianic views generates a dialectic between reality and vision; it is complemented by the sagacity of compositions such as *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes* and the 23rd Psalm, which guide the individual to retain equanimity despite the turbulence outside.

In sum, although the Bible contains elements which were later worked into a vision of Messiah, son of David, and a final resolution of the battle against evil, they do not necessarily belong together; they are expressions of hope, not definitions of an overarching doctrine.

Pre-Rabbinic Jewish Developments

The definition of a canon of Hebrew scripture, in the sense of a body of works accepted as divinely inspired, did not occur until the rabbinic period. Though most of the works that ultimately retained in the Hebrew canon had long been regarded as sacred, there was less agreement on the status of some undoubtedly Jewish works which, though ultimately rejected by the rabbis, found their way into collections of Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha and were preserved in translation by Christians.

³ *Daniel* is relegated by the Rabbis to Hagiographa; he is not considered a prophet (Babylonian Talmud *Megilla* 3a; *Bava Batra* 15a).

Hebrew texts of several, as well as additional Jewish sacred writings of the period, have been recovered among the Qumran scrolls.

These “Deutero-Canonical” writings offer some insight into the way Jewish ideas on “salvation” and “Messiah” developed in the immediate pre-Christian and first Christian centuries. We cannot know, of course, to what extent such works enjoyed authority or were typical of Jewish thought at the time.

Apocrypha

Common throughout the Apocrypha is the conviction that God will deliver his people, Israel, from suffering and persecution, provided they are true to Him and obey His commandments. There is no reference to a final Messiah, descended from David; there are, however, hints of a future life in which the righteous are vindicated.

Ben Sira (also known as *Ecclesiasticus*, or *The Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach*) was composed in Hebrew in Judea around 180 BCE, in the time of Simon the High Priest. In the tradition of wisdom literature, he preaches virtue and rails against injustice, assuring the hearer that God will vindicate the wronged and punish the wicked. Living in a time of relative peace and prosperity under a just ruler, he is not particularly concerned with apocalyptic scenarios. However, in Chapter 36 he offers this prayer to God:

Have mercy upon us ... and cause the fear of thee to fall upon all the nations ... let them know thee, as we have known that there is no God but thee ... Rouse thy anger and pour out thy wrath ... Hasten the day, and remember the appointed time...Hearken, O Lord, to the prayer of thy servants, according to the blessing of Aaron for thy people, and all who are on the earth will know that thou art the Lord, the God of the ages. (Ben Sira 36:1-17)

Again in 48:10, alluding to Malachi 4:5-6, Ben Sira speaks of Elijah coming to “turn the heart of the father to the son, and to restore the tribes of Jacob”, but this is in the context of historical review rather than apocalypse. There is no mention of a personal Messiah or “son of David”.

Comfort and restoration feature in *Baruch* 4:5-5:9, but no Messiah, since the author pretends to be Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah, predicting the return of the exiles from Babylon.

Maccabees 1 and 2 are deeply concerned with God’s saving acts through his ultimate triumph over the enemies of Israel; neither book, though composed in the aftermath of persecution and oppression, features characteristically Messianic material, though 2 *Maccabees* 7 introduces the concept of bodily resurrection of the righteous when good ultimately defeats evil.

Wisdom of Solomon, probably composed in Alexandria in the late first century BCE at a time of conflict with “idolators”, adopts a more apocalyptic tone. The wise, who are devoted to God through truth and righteousness, will triumph: “The righteous live for ever, and their reward is with the Lord” (5:15). The “saviour” is God alone: “... he who turned toward [the token of deliverance] was saved, not by what he saw, but by Thee, the Saviour of all” (16:7). Reflecting on the Exodus, and perhaps alluding to Tristo-Isaiah’s “New heaven and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17), the author, posing as King Solomon, writes of God’s deliverance, “For the whole creation in its nature was fashioned anew” (19:6).

Pseudepigrapha

The *Book of Jubilees*, composed in Hebrew in the latter part of the second century BCE (VanderKam 2001, 17-21), claims to present "the history of the division of the days of the law and of the testimony, of the events of the years, the (year) weeks, of their Jubilees throughout all the years of the world, as the Lord spake to Moses on Mount Sinai" (Prologue, trans. R. H. Charles). The jubilees are periods of 49 years, of seven "year-weeks" each, into which all history is divided; Sabbath observance, the "seventh day", is of prime significance in the author's worldview.

Such a pre-ordained scheme invites speculation on what will happen at the end of days. *Jubilees* details events no later than the time of Moses, to whom it is said to have been revealed; the author therefore ingeniously inserts his prophecy of the end things after the death of Abraham, in the context of a decline of the generations (23:11-31). Toward the end of the period of decline, following wars and chastisements, an era of peace and security will commence:

And there shall be no Satan nor any evil destroyer; For all their days shall be of blessing and healing ... "the children shall begin to study the laws ... And to return to the path of righteousness ... And all their days they shall complete and live in peace and in joy, and they shall rise up and see great peace, And drive out their adversaries. And the righteous shall see and be thankful, And rejoice with joy for ever and ever ... And they shall know that it is the Lord who executes judgement, And shows mercy to hundreds and thousands and to all that love him" (Jubilees 23:26-31, trans. R. H. Charles).

There is no hint in this of a Messiah, son of David, nor of any other human leader. It is God and no other who accepts genuine penitence, forgives sin, and rescues ('saves') Israel from her enemies.

The Sybil, a woman believed to possess prophetic power, is cited several times by classical authors, not least Aristophanes, Plato and Aristotle. Later authors recognized a plurality of sibyls; Virgil, for instance, has Aeneas consulting the Cumean Sibyl before his descent to the lower world (*Aeneid* VI: 10). By the early second century BCE Greek Jews of apocalyptic leanings were compiling "Sibylline oracles" of their own in the cause of promoting monotheism. One of these seems to be the basis for Book III of the extant *Sibylline Oracles*, a collection of eight books known through a sixth or seventh-century Greek manuscript. Virgil's famous description of the Golden Age in *Eclogue* IV draws on the latter part of Book 3, itself much indebted to Isaiah. The author looks to the "seventh king of Egypt" – either Ptolemy VI Philometor or Ptolemy VIII Euergetes – as an ideal king of divine status (a notion rooted in Egyptian tradition) (Collins 1974, 33):

There shall come to mortals the judgment of the Eternal God ... Earth the universal mother shall give to mortals her best fruit in countless store of corn, wine and oil ... No war shall there be any more ... king shall be friendly with king till the end of the age, and a common law for men throughout all the earth shall the Eternal perfect for He above is God and there is none else ... eschew unlawful service: serve the Living God. Shun adultery and confused intercourse with males the Eternal will surely be wrath with him who commits these sins ... from every land shall they bring frankincense and gifts to the house of the great God ... And wolves and lambs together shall crop grass ... (Sibylline Oracles 3:785 f., trans. from the Ethiopic text by H. C. O. Lanchester, in Charles 1913)

Several books of uncertain date and authorship are pseudonymously attributed to Enoch, whose relatively brief life and “assumption” are recorded in Genesis 5:21-24; Ben Sira (44:16) says Enoch pleased the Lord and was placed in Paradise.

The only complete manuscripts of *1 Enoch* are in Ethiopic, translated from a Greek translation of the original Hebrew or Aramaic; fragments of the original, though not of the “Parables”, have been found at Qumran. It is a composite work, whose contents range from the fourth century BCE to in some time in the first century CE (Nickelsberg 2001). The latest section, Chapters 37 through 69 or possibly 71, comprises the “Parables of Enoch”, which are greatly concerned with eschatology, including the final judgement and the destiny of the fallen angels and of the evil kings of the earth; it is dated by Nickelsberg and VanderKam (2012, 61) to between 40 and 70 CE. God is referred to as “Lord of Spirits”, an expression taken from *Numbers* 16:22 and 27:16. The leader of the righteous⁴ is called “The Elect One”, a term used of the Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 42:1) but common elsewhere, often in the plural (for example 2 Sam 21:6 re Saul; Isaiah 65:9, 15, 22; Psalms 89:4; 105:6, 43); he is also referred to as “The Righteous One” or “Son of Man”, and rarely as “anointed” (Messiah).

The phrase “son of man” is common in Ezekiel, where the prophet is addressed by that term in order to stress his mortality; Daniel 7:13 has a vision of “one like a son of man”, that is, a divine being with the appearance of a man. Some argue that *1 Enoch* is the first known instance of the use of “Son of Man” as a definite title in Jewish writings; Nickelsberg and VanderKam (2012, 113-116) have carefully analyzed the three forms the title takes in the Ethiopic text; they are equivalent to “son of humankind/a human”, “son of a/the man”, and “son of the offspring of the mother of the living”, none of which is unequivocally a title. Biblical Hebrew cannot place the definite article before the phrase in the way this is done in Greek, so there can be no certainty that the original text intended anything more than a contrast between God and the human agent. On the other hand, “The Elect” does seem to possess supernatural qualities; he is perhaps “pre-existent”, having been around at least since the time of Enoch, and is destined to be placed by God on the Throne of Glory and to issue judgments (61:8; 62:2). It is, of course, difficult to determine the extent of Christian interpolations in the extant texts.

4 Ezra, composed in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, worries about the prevalence of evil in the world. “Ezra” enters into dialogues with God on the topic, and poses the question, When will it end? (4:33) He learns that the signs that precede the end include general panic, environmental degradation and all manner of unnatural happenings, such as the sun shining by night, blood trickling from wood, people in commotion, and women bearing monsters (Chapter 5). The so-called “Rabbinic Apocalypse”, a century or more later, rewrites the confusion in social terms: “The young insult the old, the old stand in the presence of the young, a daughter rises against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; the faces of the generation are like the faces of dogs, and a son is not abashed in the presence of his father” (Mishna *Sota* 9 end; Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 97a). Whosoever survives the calamities “shall be saved and shall see my salvation and the end of my world ... and the heart of the earth’s inhabitants shall be changed, and be converted to a different spirit” (*4 Ezra* 6:25-26 trans. Stone 2013).

Chapter 13 opens with a vision of wind stirring up a violent storm at sea from which a Man emerges. The vision is interpreted (13:26) as standing for the Man whom the Most High is keeping in reserve to stand upon Mount Zion and reprove the nations who threaten Israel; he will defeat them not by arms but through Torah (the Law). Then he will restore the lost Ten Tribes and all Israel will dwell in peace amid great wonders. In answer to (pseudo-)Ezra’s question as to why the vision was of a man

⁴ On the titles see VanderKam and Nickelsberg (2012), 113-124.

emerging from the sea, the Lord tells him: “Just as one can neither seek out nor know what is in the deep of the sea, even so no one upon earth sees my Son but in the time of his day” (13:52 trans. G. H. Box, in Charles 1913). The capital ‘S’ - there is of course no capital ‘S’ in the original - is tendentious; Stone (2013, 76) translates “my servant”, noting variant ancient versions. As in Deuteronomy 14:1, “You are sons of the Lord your God”, Hebrew “son of God” indicates holiness and dedication, not supernatural status.

2 *Baruch* (“Syriac Baruch”) is a composite pseudepigraphical text compiled not long after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Taking his lead from Deuteronomy 11:26-28, the author insists that man has the power to choose between right and wrong, good and evil; any punishment he suffers is the consequence of his own disobedience, not that of Adam which it reflects (chapters 17-19). The book contains several distinct Messianic Apocalypses, which share an upbeat view on Israel’s future on earth. The first, chapters 27-30, prophesies twelve wars, after which the Messiah will be revealed and Behemoth and Leviathan will be food “for those that are left”, while the earth yields its fruit ten thousand-fold. The righteous will be resurrected. Chapters 53-74 commence with a vision, which is then interpreted by the angel Ramiel. The Messiah will judge nations (72), sparing those who have not “trodden down Israel”. Joy and gladness will prevail throughout the earth, no-one will die untimely, women will not have pain when they bear children, the reapers shall not grow weary. (73-74)

The consensus until recently was that *Psalms of Solomon*, known through Greek and Syriac manuscripts, was originally composed in Hebrew. Jan Joosten (Bons and Puchelle 2015, 31-47) has cast doubt on this, arguing that the “Hebraisms” are really “Septuagintisms” and the work was composed in Greek. He accepts, however, that the Psalms originated in Jerusalem shortly after its conquest by Pompey in 63 BCE, concluding that “a Greek origin i[mplic]s rethinking the social and political location of the author of the corpus and of the group to whom it is addressed. Language use is never neutral. It may have been particularly fraught with significance among Jews in Jerusalem during the early Roman age.”

The Psalms contrast saints and sinners; they assure the latter of their destruction and the former of eternal bliss:

The destruction of the sinner is for ever, And he shall not be remembered, when the righteous is visited. This is the portion of sinners for ever.

But they that fear the Lord shall rise to life eternal, And their life (shall be) in the light of the Lord, and shall come to an end no more. (Psalms of Solomon 3:14-16, trans. G. Buchanan Gray, in Charles 1913)

Psalms of Solomon does indeed foretell a Messiah figure of the House of David. He saves Israel by defeating her enemies and ruling in justice and peace:

Behold, O Lord, and raise up to them their king, the son of David ... And gird him with strength, that he may shatter unrighteous rulers, And that he may purge Jerusalem from nations that trample her ...

He shall destroy the pride of the sinner as a potter’s vessel... At his rebuke nations shall flee ...

And he shall gather together a holy people, whom he shall lead in righteousness ... And he shall not suffer any unrighteousness to lodge any more in their midst,

Nor shall there dwell with them any man that knoweth wickedness, For he shall know them, that they are all sons of their God. (Psalms of Solomon 17:23-30)

No. 18, the final psalm in the collection, briefly mentions “The Lord’s anointed”:

... when he bringeth back His anointed. Blessed shall they be that shall be in those days, In that they shall see the goodness of the Lord which He shall perform for the generation that is to come, Under the rod of chastening of the Lord’s anointed in the fear of his God, In the spirit of wisdom and righteousness and strength. (Psalms of Solomon 18:6-8).

Other pre-Rabbinic Jewish writings

Neither Apocrypha nor Pseudepigrapha give a comprehensive picture of Jewish thinking in their time; some of the books they contain were produced by marginal groups, and since many of the texts were preserved by Christians, and in translations made by or for Christians, there may be occasional Christian ‘editing’. Besides, the fundamental Jewish “book” throughout this time, common to all Jews, was the collection that came to be recognized as the Bible, whether in the original Hebrew or in the Greek version known as the Septuagint, part of which – notably the Pentateuch - may have been produced as early as the third century BCE. Translation, however, is not an innocent process, and the Jews of Alexandria and other Hellenistic cities where the Bible was read in Greek were not hearing the text in the same way as those familiar with it in Hebrew. Did Hellenistic culture somehow colour their understanding of the Biblical concepts of salvation and Messiah?

We possess no more than traces of what was likely an extensive Greek Jewish literature produced principally in Alexandria, comprising works such as the dramas of Ezekiel the Tragedian and the historical work of Demetrius the Chronographer, both of which have been for the most part lost, since they were of little or no interest to Christians or Rabbinic Jews. The major exception is Philo of Alexandria, forgotten for centuries by Jews (though much of his teaching was absorbed, if indirectly, by the Rabbis), but directly influential on Christian theology. How did Philo, a Hellenistic intellectual, understand Biblical promises of salvation, redemption and the like?

Philo

Philo says nothing about a Messiah, son of David, but a great deal about how human beings can achieve moral and intellectual perfection and hence immortality. In *De Opificio*, his treatise on the Creation narrative, he reflects on man as immortal – a notion drawn from Plato rather than the Bible. God’s beneficence in creation makes possible the life of contemplation in which one can ascend from the material world of the second creation story (Genesis 2:4-25) to the pure forms (*sive* Platonic ideas) of the first creation (Genesis 1:1-2:3):

It was His will that when man came into existence he should be at a loss for none of the means of living and of living well. The means of living are provided by the lavish supplies of all that makes for enjoyment; the means of living well by the contemplation of the heavenly existences, for smitten by their contemplation the mind conceives a longing for the knowledge of them. And from this philosophy took its rise, by which man, mortal though he be, is rendered immortal. (De Opificio 77. All translations by F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, in the Loeb series.)

Philo's prime concern is with the individual as human being rather than with Israel as chosen nation. Nevertheless, he sees Israel, through God's gift of Torah, the Perfect Law, as a model. Echoing Stoic philosophy, he bemoans the failure of human beings to restrain their passions; if only 'our race' (Israel) would control their selfish impulses and attain inner peace God would provide bountifully for them:

... if the unmeasured impulses of men's passions were calmed and allayed by self-mastery, and their earnestness and eager striving after the affliction of wrongs were checked by righteousness ; if, in a word, the vices and the fruitless practices to which they prompt were to give place to the virtues and their corresponding activities, the warfare in the soul, of all wars veritably the most dire and most grievous, would have been abolished, and peace would prevail and would in quiet and gentle ways provide good order for the exercise of our faculties, and there would be hope that God, being the Lover of virtue and the Lover of what is good and beautiful, would provide for our race good things all coming forth spontaneously and all in readiness. (De Opificio 81)

Moses himself, in his last words, combined a call to purity of mind with loving words of assurance and comfort to Israel:

Thus in his post amid the ethereal choristers the great Revealer blended with the strains of thankfulness to God his own true feelings of affection to the nation, therein joining with his arraignment of them for past sins his admonitions for the present occasion and calls to a sounder mind, and his exhortations for the future expressed in hopeful words of comfort which needs must be followed by their happy fulfilment. (De Virtutibus 75, commenting on Deuteronomy 32)

De Praemiis et Poenis ("On Rewards and Punishments") sections 79-126, based on Deuteronomy 30:11-14, concerns blessings to be received by the righteous. Sections 127-162 deal with the curses, while 163-172 are about the final days, in which Israel will repent:

164 For even though they dwell in the uttermost parts of the earth, in slavery to those who led them away captive, one signal, as it were, one day will bring liberty to all. This conversion in a body to virtue will strike awe into their masters, who will set them free, ashamed to rule over men better than themselves. 165 ... they ... will arise and post from every side with one impulse to the one appointed place, guided in their pilgrimage by a vision divine ... 168 When they have arrived, the cities which now lay in ruins will be cities once more; the barren will change into fruitfulness ... 169 Everything will suddenly be reversed, God will turn the curses against the enemies of these penitents ... 172 For just as when the stalks of plants are cut away, if the roots are left undestroyed, so too if in the soul a tiny seed be left of the qualities which promote virtue ... from that little seed spring forth the fairest and most precious things in human life, by which states are constituted manned with good citizens, and nations grow into a great population. (De Praemiis et Poenis)

He expresses a similar thought in his biography of Moses:

Afterwards the time came when [Moses] had to make his pilgrimage from earth to heaven ... Then, indeed, we find him possessed by the spirit, no longer uttering

general truths to the whole nation but prophesying to each tribe in particular.
(Vita Mosis 2.288)

Philo is here focused on Israel, which he sees as an *ethnos* in much the same way as a Greek living in Alexandria might see himself as belonging to a broader *ethnos* with its roots in a different geographical location; both refer condescendingly to nations other than their own as *ta ethnoi* “the [other] nations” – in Hebrew *goyim*. As a philosopher he is aware that his observations must apply in principle to humanity as a whole. Indeed, he had implied this in an earlier passage in the *Life of Moses*:

But if a fresh start should be made to brighter prospects ... I believe that each nation would abandon its peculiar ways, and, throwing overboard their ancestral customs, turn to honouring our laws alone. For, when the brightness of their shining is accompanied by national prosperity, it will darken the light of others as the risen sun darkens the stars. (Vita Mosis 2.44)

His point is that the laws revealed through Moses are indeed of universal application, and that any nation that adopts them in preference to its own, inferior laws will profit thereby; change in society results not through blind chance (*tuchē*) ceaselessly driven by necessity, but as the lasting achievement of the *logos* implanted in humanity by God. This contrasts strongly with the attitude of Polybius, who had written more than a century earlier:

Just as Fortune made almost all the affairs of the world incline in one direction, and force them to converge upon one and the same part; so it is my task as an historian to put before my readers a compendious view of the part played by Fortune in bringing about its general purpose. It was this peculiarity which originally challenged my attention and determined me on undertaking this work.
(The Histories of Polybius Book One, tr. Evelyn Shuckburgh. Cambridge Ontario: In Parentheses Publications, 2002. Section 4.)

Is it the case, as claimed by Hecht (Neusner et alia (1987),158), that Philo “dehistoricizes the messianic drama”? By no means. The Messianic age is attainable here on earth, through human effort based on God’s revealed laws, and it is for all humankind to take the appropriate steps. A personal Messiah of the kind suggested by some prophets is simply irrelevant; it is after all not hinted at in the Pentateuch, which for Philo is the ultimate Revelation.

Were Philo’s ideas representative of Jewish thought in his time? Or were Jews in general, in the first century CE, committed to some apocalyptic vision of the End, of a kind with which Philo clearly has no truck? We can only speculate. Ordinary people (the “lower classes”) were presumably more concerned with day-to-day survival, though doubtless susceptible to being roused, when they felt the burden of oppression, by nationalist or religious enthusiasts who promised them miraculous delivery from their suffering. Philo, an upper-class intellectual, brother of Alexander the Alabarch, one of the wealthiest men of his time,⁵ would naturally be more restrained, seeing himself and his ‘race’ in the broader context of humanity, while despising contemporary politics as a breeding ground for ambition and strife. He takes an irenic view of the Golden Age to come, shunning the apocalyptic prophesies of final battles and triumphant Messiah with which he was undoubtedly

⁵ Daniel E. Schwartz, in *Cambridge Companion*, 12-13.

familiar. When he does use Messianic terminology it is as metaphor; messianic names are attributed to the *logos*, i.e. reason, which will guide man to the truth, stimulating virtue in human soul.⁶

Messianic deliverance, 'salvation', is for Philo internal transformation, available to humankind universally if only they will be guided by the divine law. For the individual, it is attainable in the here and now: "The wise man lives even in this life in a kind of immortality, which will take on a perfect form after his death" (*De Opificio* 154; *QE* 2.39) (Termini, 108).

Josephus

The only other Jewish writer whose works, in Greek, were extensively preserved – again, by Christians – is Joseph ben Mattathias, known as Josephus Flavius after his adoption by the Flavian emperors. Whereas Philo writes as a theologian, Josephus writes primarily as an historian, first of the war against Rome, then of the history of the Jewish people.

In the autobiography he composed late in life he describes how, from his sixteenth to his nineteenth year, he apprenticed himself in turn to Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, and in addition to the desert hermit Bannus, eventually choosing to live as a Pharisee (*Life*, 8-11). In 61 CE he took part in a delegation to Rome to intercede with Nero on behalf of some Jewish prisoners. On his return he found Jerusalem in some ferment which, he claims, he attempted without success to calm down, spelling out the likely consequences of all-out war with Rome. Internal factions developed, the situation was mishandled by Rome, the peace party was side-lined, and in 66 the Great Revolt erupted. Josephus, despite misgivings (so he later claimed), accepted a commission as military commander in Galilee. He was defeated, defected to Vespasian, and attempted in vain to persuade his compatriots to come to terms with Rome. Meanwhile, Vespasian became Emperor (Josephus claims to have prophesied this), leaving his son Titus to achieve victory.

Josephus returned with Vespasian to Rome, becoming his client, and wrote his account of the Wars, perhaps originally in Aramaic. Some 20 years later he composed his voluminous *Antiquities of the Jews* in Greek, "thinking it will appear to all the Greeks worthy of their study; for it will contain all our antiquities, and the constitution of our government, as interpreted out of the Hebrew Scriptures" (*Antiquities* 1:5).

In none of his writings does he openly espouse any kind of messianic doctrine. It would not, of course, have been politic to do so, since his target audience was Roman, not Jewish. He loses no opportunity, moreover, in the *Wars* and elsewhere, to pour scorn on "zealots", "brigands" and "tyrants", not least his bête-noire and rival commander John of Gischala.

In *Wars* 6:312-314 Josephus refers to an "ambiguous oracle" (Χρησμός ἀμφίβολος) in the Jewish holy writings to the effect that one from their country would rule the world,⁷ and says that the oracle was misunderstood and refers to Vespasian. This hardly demonstrates, as claimed by some scholars, that he saw Vespasian as a "Messiah figure"; rather, he is flattering the emperor and distancing himself from insurrection.

Grabbe (2002, 278-9) has suggested that the crux of Josephus's personal beliefs is to be found in his discussion of the book of Daniel, in particular Daniel 2 (*Antiquities* 10.10.3-4; §§195-210). The "fourth kingdom as strong as iron (Daniel 2:33, 40)" is presumably Rome; Josephus is not explicit, and declines to interpret the "stone cut out without hands" (2:34, 45). Perhaps he was expecting

⁶ *De confusione linguarum* 62-63.

⁷ As noted by H. St. J. Thackeray in his translation in the Loeb edition, there are similar reports in Tacitus *Histories* 5:13 and Suetonius *Vespasian* 4.

Rome to be destroyed by supernatural means, if not in the immediate future. Perhaps indeed, in his youth, Josephus had been swayed by apocalyptic notions, or even in old age dreamed of the eventual collapse of Rome and triumph of Israel; analogous hopes would doubtless have been entertained by most subject nations. Grabbe may be reading too much into Josephus' account of Daniel; *Antiquities* is an historical work, not a theology of Judaism.

Grabbe (2002, 271) suggests that, so far as pre-Rabbinic Judaism is concerned, "Although messianic expectations were important to some groups, they seem to have been central to few, if any; others appear not to have had any sort of belief in a messianic figure." This may be true of formal "schools"; but it is clear from Josephus' account as well as other evidence that the general population of Judea was sufficiently familiar with promises of miraculous intervention by God to be susceptible, in times of perceived oppression, to being roused to an extreme pitch of excitement by leaders who exploited their hopes for miraculous redemption.

The Rabbis on Salvation

Rabbinic Judaism emerged from Pharisaism in the course of the first two centuries CE, and eventually displaced most other forms of Judaism. Its best-known formulation is the Mishna, compiled in the early third century under the guidance of Judah ha-Nasi, in Galilee. Mishna is not a theological tract; it is an attempt to spell out Torah as law, perhaps inspired by the systemization of Roman law being undertaken at about the same time by the Phoenician-origin jurists Ulpian and Papinian; Berytus 'Nutris Legum' (Beirut, 'Mother of Law'), north of Galilee, was from the mid-third century CE until the earthquake of 551 a major school of Roman law and jurisprudence. Judah ha-Nasi sought to bolster the identity of the Jewish people by instituting and implementing a code of law firmly rooted within their own tradition. This was especially relevant following the grant of Roman citizenship to all male freeman in the Empire by Caracalla in 212; in a situation where litigants could have access to Roman courts, the Rabbis sought to impose in its place the jurisdiction of what they accepted as divine law.

The Code they created was not geared simply to immediate needs, but to a restored Israel, complete with Temple, priests, Levites, monarch and Sanhedrin. This restoration, in the view of the Rabbis, would be brought about by divine intervention, and be implemented by the Messiah, son of David – not that the Mishna itself spells this out, though it has at least one reference (*Berakhot* 1:5) to what the law will be in the "Days of the Messiah", and two of its six volumes ('Orders') are devoted to topics (sacrifices, ritual purity) which could only be fully implemented within a restored, presumably messianic, kingdom. As Jacob Neusner wrote (1987,268), stressing that Mishnah was about sanctification, not eschatology. "To be sure, the framers of the Mishnah may also have had a theory of the Messiah and of the meaning of Israel's history and destiny. But they kept it hidden, and their document manages to provide an immense account of Israel's life without explicitly telling us about such matters."

Liturgy

But significant as the Mishna was, it was only one element in the culture of the Rabbis; it was the "Oral Torah", articulating laws implicit in the "Written Torah", or Pentateuch, which remains the ultimate authority and provides the basic vocabulary. It has only the briefest reference, moreover, to the Jewish mystical tradition, already well-established in its time (Scholem1965). Nor does it contain, though it regulates, the Rabbinic liturgy, which had attained its basic form under Gamaliel II at Yavneh (Jamnia) towards the end of the first century.

Gamaliel instituted two (subsequently increased to three) daily prayer sessions, each centred on the *tefilla*, or “prayer” *par excellence*. Gamaliel’s liturgy, endorsed and regulated by the Mishna, conveyed the essence of Jewish faith to the people; it moulded the faith of everyone, not just the learned. It is unequivocal on matters concerning salvation.

The *tefilla* consists of three main sections, of praise, petition and thanksgiving respectively, made up of eighteen (eventually nineteen) *berakhot* (“benedictions”). The twelve (thirteen) central benedictions formulate, in addition to requests for personal daily needs such as health and prosperity, the broader aspirations of the Jewish people collectively. Here are some of the phrases relating to salvation and associated concepts⁸:

Benediction

No.

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 5 | Bring us back, our Father, to your Torah. Draw us near ... to your service. Lead us back to You in perfect repentance. Blessed are you, O Lord, who takes delight in repentance. |
| 6 | Forgives us our sins ... Blessed are you, O Lord, who graciously and amply forgives. |
| 7 | Look on our affliction, plead our cause, and redeem us soon ... Blessed are you, O Lord, Redeemer of Israel. |
| 8 | Heal us, Lord, and we shall be healed. Save us and we shall be saved ... |
| 10 | Sound the great shofar for our freedom, raise high the banner to gather our exiles ... Blessed are you, O Lord, who gathers the dispersed of his people Israel. |
| 11 | Restore our judges as at first ... May you alone, Lord, reign over us with lovingkindness ... Blessed are you, O Lord, the King who loves righteousness and justice. |
| 14/15 | To Jerusalem, your city, may You return in compassion ... May the offshoot of your servant David soon flower ... Blessed are you, O Lord, who makes the glory of salvation flourish. |
| 17 | Restore the [sacrificial] service to your most holy house ... Blessed are you, O Lord, who restores His presence to Zion. |

Regular recitation of such prayers is designed to instil in the participants:

1. With God’s grace we can obtain forgiveness for our sins and come closer to His service
2. Whether as individuals or collectively as Israelites we are in distress we should turn to God, who can save us from it
3. We look forward to the restoration of justice under God’s laws
4. We anticipate the restoration of sacrifices in the Temple, both to offer praise and thanksgiving to God and to atone for sin
5. We expect a rightful king of the house of David to lead the restored society.

This is not presented in the form of a catechism, nor as a challenge to take up arms against the current, unjust power. It articulates a quiet hope for restoration of the [imagined] perfect state of society in times past. The hope is there, but the immediate task is to live humbly in accordance with God’s commandments.

⁸ Translations are based on that by J. Sacks, in the *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, 4th Ed. (London: Collins, 2007), with occasional stylistic modifications. The exact wording as authorized by Gamaliel cannot be precisely determined, but variations are not significant for the present purpose.

Talmud

Talmud has come down to us in two versions, the earlier and less comprehensive Jerusalem Talmud (also known as the Talmud of the Land of Israel) and the Babylonian Talmud; essentially, they represent pre-Islamic Judaism. Both Talmudim take the form of commentary on the Mishna; they interpret Mishna, seek its scriptural basis, review other contemporary Rabbinic material, and incorporate homiletics, folk elements, anecdotes, popular science, and theological speculations, but never the kind of systematic theology that was developed by contemporary Christians. The Rabbis did not convene great ecumenical councils, and even if they had it is unlikely that any emperor would have compelled them to agree theological doctrines in the way that Constantine forced Christian doctrinal uniformity at Nicaea. They assumed theological positions without feeling the need to define them. Consequently, it is not possible to give definitive answers to questions such as “What is the teaching of the Rabbis on salvation?”; all we can do is set down a few homiletic statements to illustrate something of the range of thought.

Some scholars have argued that the rabbis played down apocalyptic, but this is an oversimplification. This anecdote about two rabbis at the time of the Bar Kochba Revolt (131-135 CE) suggests that attitudes differed already at that time:

Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai taught: My Master, Rabbi Akiva, read the verse “There shall step forth a star (Heb: Kochav) out of Jacob” (Numbers 24:27) as “Koziba⁹ shall step forth out of Jacob”; when he saw Bar Koziba he proclaimed, “This is the Messiah”. Rabbi Jochanan ben Torta said to him, “Akiva! Grass will grow from your cheeks before the son of David comes!” (Jerusalem Talmud Ta’anit 68d (4:1))

Messianic speculation persisted despite Bar Kochba’s costly failure. Shmuel bar Naḥmani cites his master, Jonathan, attempting to dampen the enthusiasm of those who “calculate the end”:

Said Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani in the name of Rabbi Jonathan: May those who calculate end-times perish! For people say, as the [calculated] time has passed and [the Messiah] has not come, he will never come. But retain your hope in him, as it is written, “Though he delay, wait for him” (Habakkuk 2:3). (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 97b)

Rav, in third-century Babylonia, observed: “All the ‘end-times’ have passed; [coming of Messiah] now depends entirely on penitence and good deeds” (Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 97b).

Can anything be done to hasten redemption? Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of R. Simeon bar Yochai, If Israel observed two Sabbaths perfectly [they would be redeemed] (Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 118b). Rabbi Judah bar Ilai¹⁰ said, Great is charity, for it leads to redemption. (Babylonian Talmud *Bava Batra* 10a).

Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great and Rabbi Simeon ben Ḥalafta were walking together in the plain of Arbel as the sun rose ... Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great observed to Rabbi Simeon ben Ḥalafta ... That is how Israel will be redeemed; little by little, then the light will grow. (Jerusalem Talmud Yoma 40b (3:2))

⁹The leader of the Revolt, as attested by his signature on documents recovered by archaeologists, was Simon bar Koziba; the name Bar Kochba derives from the play on words attributed to Akiva.

¹⁰ Full name as in *Yalkut Shimoni* Isaiah #484.

In the early 360s the emperor Julian authorised the rebuilding of the Temple (or so it was widely believed). However, he was killed in 363 and was succeeded by Jovian, who restored Christianity to its privileged position. This may be the background against which Hillel II appeared to deny the coming of Messiah:

Rabbi Hillel says: Israel have no Messiah; they consumed him already in the days of Hezekiah.¹¹ Rav Yosef said: May God forgive Rabbi Hillel! When was Hezekiah? In [the period of] the First Temple. But Zechariah prophesied in [the period of] the Second Temple. ((Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 99a)

No-one accuses Hillel of heresy for his denial. Indeed, in the only passage in the Mishna which appears to define correct belief, Messiah is conspicuous by his absence:

These have no portion in the world to come: One who denies that resurrection is [indicated] in the Torah, or that the Torah is from heaven, and an Apikoros¹². (Mishna Sanhedrin 10:1)

This brief statement of the Mishna introduces another key concept in rabbinic talk on salvation. Since “saved” retains its root meaning of being rescued from enemies or other misfortunes, you cannot ask, in a universal sense, “How can I be saved?”. The nearest equivalent, in Rabbinic discourse, would be, “How can I be sure of a portion in the world to come?”.

Atonement

How do you rid yourself of the consequences of sin? You repent sincerely, asking God for forgiveness; David, for instance, reprimanded by the prophet Nathan, repented of his sin with Bath-Sheba, and the Lord “put away” his sin (2 Samuel 12:13). You can, in addition, help the process along by bringing an offering, as described at length in the opening chapters of Leviticus, but this too requires penitence. Suffering, “chastisement”, may lead you to repent, but is not itself of the essence of atonement.

Do sons suffer for the sins of their fathers, as Exodus 20:5 (“visiting the guilt of the father on the sons ...”) and Deuteronomy 5:9 appear to suggest? Ezekiel vigorously contested this: “The person who sins, he alone shall die. A child shall not bear the burden of a parent’s guilt ... the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to him alone” (18:20). At any rate, outside the special relationship of parent and child, who are perhaps looked upon as body and limb, atonement is strictly a matter of the relationship between an individual and his/her God.

Some detect a contrary note in the ‘Servant Songs’ of Deutero-Isaiah. In verses such as 50:8 and 52:13-15 the Servant accepts suffering as part of his mission; in 53:5 “he was wounded because of our transgressions”, and in 53:8 “cut off from the land of the living for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due”; in 53:10 he proposes himself as an offering for [the people’s] guilt, and two verses later “bore the guilt of the many and made intercession for sinners”. If the Servant in these verses is the prophet, some notion of vicarious atonement is indicated; he assumes the role of sacrifice on behalf of the people. If, as many commentators argue, the Servant is Israel

¹¹ i.e. Hezekiah fulfilled Isaiah’s prediction.

¹² The meaning of *Apikoros* (Epicurus) is much debated. It probably originally referred to one who held, like Epicurus, that events are random, i.e. not determined by God. It later came to mean one who was disrespectful to the rabbis.

herself, a different interpretation is required; the prophet is describing how the innocent suffer on account of evildoers, yet nevertheless intercede on their behalf.

There is perhaps another hint of vicarious atonement in Ezekiel 4:6. But by and large the notion that I should sin, and someone else atone for my sin, is not the biblical view.

Rabbinic tradition occasionally invokes vicarious atonement in an attempt to justify the sufferings of the righteous, or of innocent children:

Rabbi Hiyya bar [Ab]ba said: Aaron's sons died on the first of Nisan. Why, then, is their death mentioned in [the context of] the Day of Atonement? It is to teach that just as the Day of Atonement atones for [the sins of] Israel, the death of the righteous atones for [the sins of] Israel. Rabbi [Ab]ba bar Bina said: Why does scripture mention the death of Miriam [just after] the [purification ceremony of] the [red] heifer (Numbers 19:1-20:2)? It is to teach that just as the ashes of the heifer atone for [the sins of] Israel, the death of the righteous atones for [the sins of] Israel. (Jerusalem Talmud: Yoma 1:1 (38b))

The Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 33b) makes a similar point:

Rabbi Gorion – some say it was Rav Yosef the son of Shemaiah - said: If there are righteous [people] in a generation, the righteous are taken [i.e., suffer] for [the sins of] the generation. If there are no righteous in the generation, [innocent] school children are taken [i.e., suffer] for [the sins of] the generation.

Likewise (Babylonian Talmud *Moed Qatan* 28a):

Rabbi Ammi said: Why does scripture mention the death of Miriam [just after] the [purification ceremony of] the red heifer (Numbers 19:1-20:2)? It is to teach that just as the ashes of the red heifer atone for [the sins of] Israel, the death of the righteous atones for [the sins of] Israel. Rabbi Eleazar said: Why is the death of Aaron linked to the priestly garments (Numbers 20:22-29)? It is to teach that just as the priestly garments atone, the death of the righteous atones.

Penitence, sacrifices, ashes of the red heifer, priestly garments all atone for sin. Nor should we overlook the table of hospitality, at which one entertains the poor:

*Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eleazar both said: As long as the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel; now, it is a man's table that brings atonement. (Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 55a)*

To read such statements as constituting some formal doctrine of atonement is to misunderstand the nature of Rabbinic discourse. The Rabbis were not formulating a creed to which the faithful must assent. They were engaging in homiletics, using narrative to instil awareness of sin and its consequences, to exhort the faithful to repentance, and to impress on them how heavily their sins weighed upon the righteous.

In sum, atonement (*kappara*, *kippur*) is a process through which the individual sinner is restored, through penitence, to God. It is not to be confused with *yeshu 'a* ('salvation'), rescue from personal or national distress, though that way well be a consequence of atonement.

Conclusion

If we take a broad view of what we might call “classical sources” of Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, ignoring merely verbal differences, we find general agreement on human sinfulness as estrangement from God, and on penitence leading through God’s grace to forgiveness, with consequent “atonement”, that is, restoration of relationship with God. There are also common notions of renewal through the holy spirit (*ruah ha-qodesh*), and of life after death, blissful in the divine Presence.

Major differences centre on Jesus, incarnation, the role of the Messiah, and the role of sacrifice. In rabbinic Judaism, God alone forgives sin, the anticipated Messiah is a human being who will govern justly in an era of universal peace, and sacrifice though valuable is not essential to the process of atonement.

The Christian elevation of Jesus to divine as well as messianic status means that the sacrifice of Jesus, as Messiah, takes a central ‘salvific’ role in Christian theology. From a Jewish point of view the doctrine of incarnation not only compromises the unity and incorporeality of God; it confuses atonement, sacrifice, Messiah and salvation. In Judaism the role of Messiah is simply to govern society in conformity with Torah, the revealed word of God. Atonement for sin is vital; it requires neither Messiah nor sacrifice, but the sinner’s penitence and God’s grace.

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