

THE NIGHT



The Jewish liturgy in the text of the Targum on the Book of Exodus, chapter 12:42, contains a profound meditation on the theme of the night and reminds us that all the salient moments of salvation occurred during the night, when human hope seemed to be extinct. This is the text of the Targum:

“The first night was the one in which the Lord manifested himself to the world in order to create it: the earth was an empty desert and darkness spread on the surface of the abyss, but the Word of the Lord was the light that illuminates. He called it the first night.”

“The second night was the one when the Lord revealed himself to Abraham when he was one hundred years old, while his wife Sarah was ninety years old, in order that the words of Scripture might be fulfilled: indeed, Abraham generated life when he was one hundred years old and Sarah bore when she was ninety. Isaac was thirty-seven years old when he was offered on the altar. The heavens came down on earth and Isaac contemplated their perfection, and his eyes remained blinded by their perfections. And He called it the second night.”

“The third night was the one when the Lord manifested himself against the Egyptians during the night: his arm killed the first-born of Egypt and his right hand protected the first-born of the Israelites in order to accomplish the word of Scripture: Israel is my first-born son (Ex 4:22). And He called it the third night.”

“The fourth night will come about when the time arrives for the world to be redeemed. The iron bars will be broken and the generations of the wicked will be destroyed. Moses will come up from the desert and the King will come down from on high: the Word will walk in their midst and they will walk together. It is the night of Easter in the name of the Lord, a night which is predestined and prepared for the redemption of all the children of Israel in all generations.”

The nights of salvation are four, because four are the cups which the Jews drink in memory of the four words that recall the salvation in Exodus 12. In Gethsemane Jesus drinks the fifth cup which the Father has prepared for him.

The night of Gethsemane brings to completion the third and fourth night, culmination and fountain of salvation. It recalls the darkness of the process of Jesus, the betrayal of Judas, the escape of the disciples and the hour of darkness. It is the night prepared for redemption, while the yokes of iron enslave humanity. In the midst of this darkness the Christian is called to become son of light, who is redeemed by Love, and also to become son of the Resurrection.

The night of Gethsemane is a summary of the four nights of salvation in the cup which Jesus accepts to drink: the suffering of Christ permits the Christian to become a new creation, to become a true son of Abraham, Isaac, son of the smile, to go out of Egypt from the slavery of sin and to welcome the Word who walks between Moses and the King. This Word who becomes flesh frees humanity and calls all to holiness.

The liturgy of the Easter Vigil can sing these words regarding the night: *“This is the night which saved in all the earth all those who believe in Christ from the darkness of sin and corruption of the world, and consecrated them to the love of the Father and united them to the communion of saints. This is the night in which Christ broke the bonds of death, and rose victorious from the tomb.”*

O vere beata nox.