

MESSIAH at the GATES (of the city/Rome)
Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a

R. Joshua b. Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance of R. Simeon b. Yohai's tomb. He asked him: 'Have I a portion in the world to come?' He replied, 'if this Master desires it.' R. Joshua b. Levi said, 'I saw two, but heard the voice of a third.' He then asked him, 'When will the Messiah come?' — 'Go and ask him himself,' was his reply. 'Where is he sitting?' — 'At the entrance [of the city / Rome].' And by what sign may I recognise him?' — 'He is sitting among the poor lepers: all of them untie [their bandages] all at once, and rebandage them together, whereas [the Messiah] unties and rebandages each separately, [before treating the next], thinking, should I be wanted, [it being time for my appearance as the Messiah] I must not be delayed [through having to bandage a number of sores yet rebandaged].' So R. Joshua went to him and greeted him, saying, 'peace upon thee, Master and Teacher.' 'peace upon thee, O son of Levi,' he replied. 'When wilt thou come Master?' asked he, 'Today', was his answer. On his returning to Elijah, the latter enquired, 'What did he say to thee?' — 'peace Upon thee, O son of Levi,' he answered. Thereupon he [Elijah] observed, 'He thereby assured thee and thy father of [a portion in] the world to come.' 'He spoke falsely to me,' he rejoined, 'stating that he would come to-day, but has not.' Elijah answered, 'Not so. This is what he said to thee, To-day, if ye will hear his voice.'

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi was a scholar of the Talmud, who lived in the Land of Israel in the first half of the third century. He lived and taught in the city of Lod. He was an elder contemporary of Johanan bar Nappaha and Resh Lakish, who presided over the school in Tiberias. With Johanan bar Nappaha, he often engaged in homiletic exegetical discussions. It is uncertain whether the name "ben Levi" meant the son of Levi, whom some identify with Levi ben Sisi, or a descendant of the tribe of Levi.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi studied under Bar Kappara, whom he often quoted. But Joshua considered his greatest indebtedness to Rabbi Judah ben Pedaiah, from whom he learned a great number of legal rulings. He was known for his modesty and piety and gentle disposition and whenever he instituted public fasting and prayer, it was said that his appeals were answered.

His love of peace prevented him from making any attacks against the theology of the minim (heretics). He was tolerant, though they often annoyed him. Joshua devoted much of his time to furthering the public welfare. His son and student Joseph, also a notable *amora*, married the daughter of Judah haNasi. Joshua was the first to ordain fully his own pupils in all cases where ordination was requisite, thus assuming a power that hitherto had lain in the hands of the head of the Sanhedrin alone.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi was a favorite hero in legend. He was often made to be the companion of Elijah in the latter's wanderings on earth.

See, for example, *The Messiah at the Gates of Rome*.