

RABBI DOSA AND THE RABBIS DIFFER:
MESSIAH BEN JOSEPH IN THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD

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One of the most compelling figures in Rabbinic literature is Messiah ben Joseph, the latter-day Ephraimite king who dies in eschatological warfare with monstrous foes. There are references to him—by name or pseudonym—in a host of texts from the first and second millennia C.E. But the three references in the Babylonian Talmud are particularly important because of their antiquity. A single page of the Talmud, B. Suk. 52, has the distinction of containing these earliest known references to Messiah ben Joseph. This paper discusses the interpretation and dating of these texts.

1. *B. Suk. 52a (top): Messiah or the Evil Inclination*

Here is the first passage. Aramaic passages are in italics.

“And the land shall mourn family by family apart. The family of the house of David apart and their women apart” (Zech. 12:12). They said: Is not this an a fortiori conclusion? In the age to come, when they are busy mourning and no evil inclination rules them, the Torah says, “the men apart and the women apart.” How much more so now when they are busy rejoicing and the evil inclination rules them. *What is the cause of this mourning? Rabbi Dosa and the rabbis differ. One says: “For Messiah ben Joseph who is slain;” and the other says: “For the evil inclination which is slain.” It is well according to him who says, “For Messiah ben Joseph who is slain,” for this is what is written, “And they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him like the mourning for an only son” (Zech. 12:10); but according to him who says, “The evil inclination which is slain:” Is this an occasion for mourning? Is it not an occasion for rejoicing rather than weeping?*

The text is composed of several layers. There are, of course, the Bible texts. Then there are remarks by Rabbinic commentators in both Hebrew and Aramaic. The Hebrew passages represent oral traditions deriving from the land of Israel in the Tannaitic period, before 200 C.E. The Aramaic passages are the Babylonian redactor’s

comments and date from the Amoraic period, between c. 200 and 450 C.E. As Kutscher says: “MH [Mishnaic Hebrew] was a living language in Palestine only until about 200 C.E., the time of the *tannaim*, but a dead language during the time of the *amoraim*”¹

To decode the text, we begin with the Mishnah which precedes this passage. It tells how in the Temple, at the end of the first day of Sukkot, the festivities went down to the Court of Women where a great alteration had been made. This alteration, explains the Gemara, was that a gallery had been built there, so that the women could sit above and the men below, so as to avoid levity arising from contact between the sexes. But this gallery was built only after much debate. For how could it be lawful to change the Temple that had been revealed to David from on high?

That brings us to the passage above, which records the debate. The sages found scriptural sanction for the gallery by an *a fortiori* appeal to the segregation of the sexes in the latter-day Feast of Sukkot in the last chapters of Zechariah: At Sukkot in the age to come there will be no evil inclination and the people will mourn, yet the sexes will be separated; how much the more so now, when the evil inclination rules and the reveling people are prey to it.² The debate then turns to why the people will mourn in Zech. 12:12. (After all, they will live in the messianic age, when there will be no evil, for Zech. 13:1 tells of a fountain opened to cleanse from sin.) Dosa says that the mourning is for Messiah ben Joseph (whose death opened the fountain that slew the evil inclination).³ Dosa’s contemporaries disagree; they think the mourning is for the evil inclination. But the

¹ E.Y. Kutscher, “Hebrew Language, Mishnaic,” in *Ej*, vol. XVI, col. 1593. See similarly A. Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 171; N.M. Waldman, *The Recent Study of Hebrew* (Cincinnati, 1989), p. 112; M. Hadas-Lebel, *L’hébreu: 3000 ans d’histoire* (Paris, 1992), pp. 73–74.

² Only Zech. 14 refers explicitly to an eschatological Sukkot (vv. 16, 19). But, as the events of Zech. 12:3–4 form an inclusio with those of 14:2–3, 12–13, and the fountain of 13:1 seems to be the source of the stream in 14:8, the aura of the eschatological autumn feast extends over the whole passage. For further details, see D.C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter* (1997), pp. 115–16.

³ The events of Zech. 13:1 result from those of 12:10–14. The fountain cleanses *the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem* (13:1), precisely those who in 12:10–14 obtain a spirit of mercy and supplication to mourn the pierced one. The point is made by P. Lamarche, *Zacharie IX–XIV* (Paris, 1961), pp. 85–86, who argues that Zech. 12:10–13:1 is a literary unit with the structure ABB’A’, and by W. Rudolph, *Haggai, Sacharja 1–8, Sacharja 9–14, Maleachi* (Gütersloh, 1976), p. 227; see similarly R.L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (Waco, 1984), p. 280.