

ELISHA BEN ABUYAH

Translated from the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds
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The traditions concerning the mysterious “heretic rabbi,” Elisha ben Abuyah, exist in two versions. The Palestinian version is preserved in the Palestinian Talmud, tractate *Hagigah*, 2:1, the Babylonian version in the Babylonian Talmud, *Hagigah*, 14b-15b. I myself think the Palestinian version is the older, but not everybody agrees.

Aside from these two passages, we have practically no information about Elisha.

In what follows, I translate the Palestinian version almost in its entirety, adding materials from the Babylonian version (clearly marked) where appropriate. A full translation of the Babylonian version may be found in the Soncino translation of the Talmud, volume 14, pages 90-100.

My translation is rather free in some places, and I have glossed over the very difficult problems connected with the enigmatic story of the “four who entered the garden” (*pardes*).¹ The division of the material into sections is my own.

1. Elisha’s sin and damnation (Babylonian version)

Our rabbis taught: “Four men entered a garden: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, ‘the Other One,’² and Rabbi Akiba. ... Ben Azzai looked and perished. ... Ben Zoma looked and went mad. ... ‘The Other One’ mutilated the young plants. Rabbi Akiba came out safely.” ...

[The Babylonian tradition understands the “garden” as having been Paradise, and the four rabbis’ experience as a mystical ascension. In the course of that experience, “the Other One”] saw the angel Metatron, who had been given permission to sit down one

¹ Full discussion of these problems may be found in my books, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980), pages 86-92, 167-172; and *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel’s Vision* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1988), pages 31-37, 194-249. See also Howard Schwartz and Marc Bregman, *The Four Who Entered Paradise* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995). You can find recent treatments of the Elisha stories in Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition and Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), and Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach* (Stanford University Press, 2000).

² Hebrew “*Aher*”; the Babylonian tradition uses this as a fixed designation for Elisha ben Abuyah. (The Palestinian tradition calls him by his name.)

hour each day, while he recorded the merits of the Jewish people. [He was shocked, since he had expected that in heaven only God is seated, while the other heavenly beings stand in attendance on him.] He said ... "Perhaps (God forbid) there are two divinities!"

Thereupon [the other angels] took Metatron outside, and gave him sixty lashes with a whip made of fire. "Why didn't you stand up when you saw him?" they demanded. Afterwards, Metatron was given permission to erase from his book the merits of "the Other One." A heavenly voice proclaimed: "*Repent, you backsliding children* [Jeremiah 3:14] -- except for 'the Other One.'"

"The Other One" reasoned: Now that I am barred from the next world, I might as well enjoy the here and now. He gave himself over to evil ways. He found a prostitute and propositioned her. She said, "But aren't you the famous Elisha ben Abuyah?" He plucked a radish out of its bed on the Sabbath, and gave it to her.³ She said, "Oh, you must be another person." [And that is how he came to be called "the Other One."]

2. Elisha and Rabbi Meir discuss the Bible (Palestinian version; with a variant, in the last of the three dialogues, from the Babylonian version)

a. Job 42:12

Rabbi Meir was studying in the schoolhouse at Tiberias when his teacher Elisha passed by, riding a horse on the Sabbath.⁴ He was told that his teacher was outside, so he stopped his study and went out to meet him.

"What were you studying today?" Elisha asked.

He replied: "*The Lord blessed Job's later days more than his earlier ones* [Job 42:12]."

"And how did you interpret the verse?"

"I understood it as referring to the preceding verse, *The Lord doubled all that Job had* [42:10], meaning that he doubled his wealth."

"Woe to those who cannot find what they've lost! Your teacher Akiba did not interpret it that way. What he said was this: *The Lord blessed Job's later days on account of his earlier*

³ Thereby violating the Sabbath.

⁴ Strictly forbidden.

ones;⁵ in other words, the blessing Job enjoyed in his later days was through the merit of the good deeds he had done and the commandments he had obeyed in his earlier ones.”

b. Ecclesiastes 7:8

He went on: “What else were you studying?”

“*The end of an affair is better than its beginning* [Ecclesiastes 7:8].”

“And how did you interpret the verse?”

“Imagine a man,” said Rabbi Meir, “who had children in his youth and they died; then he had children in his old age, and they survived. That is a case of *the end of an affair being better than its beginning*. Imagine, again, a man who did business in his youth, and he lost his money; he did business in his old age, and he got rich. That is another case of *the end of an affair being better than its beginning*. Or imagine a man who learned Torah in his youth and forgot it, then learned Torah in his old age and practiced it. Once again, *the end of an affair is better than its beginning*.”

Elisha responded: “Woe to those who cannot find what they’ve lost! Your teacher Akiba did not interpret it that way. What he said was this: *The end of an affair is good on account of its beginning*:⁶ it can end soundly only if it began soundly. And my own life bears out his interpretation.

“My father, Abuyah, was one of the notables of Jerusalem. When I was circumcised [at the age of eight days], he invited all the notables to the celebration. They sat in one room, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua in another.

“After the people had finished eating and drinking, they began to clap their hands and to dance. Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Joshua: ‘While they’re busying themselves in their way, let’s busy ourselves in ours.’ So they sat studying the Torah, linking the Torah to the Prophets and the Prophets to the Writings. Fire came down from heaven and surrounded them.

“‘Gentlemen!’ said Abuyah. ‘Are you trying to burn my house down?’

“‘God forbid,’ they answered. ‘But we were sitting and going over words of Torah, linking the Torah to the Prophets and the Prophets to the Writings. Those words of

⁵ The Hebrew preposition *min*, used in this verse, can mean either “more than” or “on account of.” Meir understands it the first way, Elisha the second.

⁶ See the preceding note.

Torah were as happy as the day they were revealed at Sinai, and fire licked them, just as it licked them at Sinai. For fire was the essence of their revelation at Sinai: *The mountain was ablaze with fire, to the heart of heaven* [Deuteronomy 4:11].'

"Gentlemen,' said Abuyah, 'if Torah has that kind of power, I vow that if this son of mine lives I am going to dedicate him to the Torah.'

"Because his intention [in dedicating me to the Torah] was not purely for the sake of God, therefore it was not fulfilled in me."

c. Job 28:17

Elisha went on: "What else were you studying?"

"Gold and glass cannot equal it [Job 28:17]."⁷

"And how did you interpret the verse?"

Palestinian version

"I took it to mean that words of Torah are as hard to acquire as golden vessels, yet as easy to break as glass vessels. Yet, just as golden or glass vessels can be repaired if they are broken, so a scholar who has forgotten his learning can learn it all over again."

Babylonian version

He said, "The verse teaches that words of Torah are as hard to acquire as golden vessels, yet as easy to break as glass vessels."

"That was not what your teacher Akiba said! He explained the verse to mean that, just as golden and glass vessels can be repaired if they are broken, so a scholar who has gone bad is able to reform himself."

"So then, repent!"

"I have already heard," he said, "God's voice declare from behind the Veil:⁸ 'Repent, you backsliding children

⁷ "It" in this passage refers to wisdom, which the rabbis take to be the Torah.

⁸ Which, according to rabbinic tradition, separates God from his angels. Elisha refers to the tradition translated above, section 1.

[Jeremiah 3:14] -- except for "the Other One."""

Our rabbis taught: It once happened that "the Other One" was riding his horse on the Sabbath, while Rabbi Meir walked after him to learn Torah from him.

"That's enough, Meir," he said. "We have now reached the Sabbath limit."⁹

"How do you know?"

"I calculated from the paces of my horse that we have gone 2000 cubits."

"You have all this wisdom," said Meir, "and yet you do not repent?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Once I was riding my horse in front of the Holy of Holies, on the Day of Atonement, which happened to fall on a Sabbath.¹¹ I heard the divine voice issue from the Holy of Holies: '*Repent, you backsliding children* [Jeremiah 3:14] -- except for Elisha ben Abuyah, who knew my power and rebelled against me.'"

"Meir," he said, "turn back. I calculate from my horse's paces that we have reached the Sabbath limit."

Meir said: "You too -- turn back!"¹⁰

"Haven't I already told you?" he said. "I have already heard from behind the Veil: '*Repent, you backsliding children* [Jeremiah 3:14] -- except for "the Other One.'"

⁹ In rabbinic law, there is a limit to how far one is permitted to walk on the Sabbath. Elisha himself has no scruples about riding on the Sabbath, but is careful to remind his still-pious student not to inadvertently break the rule against walking too far.

¹⁰ The same Hebrew word means "turn back" and "repent."

¹¹ Rather like eating a ham and cheese sandwich in a synagogue on Passover. -- The Palestinian storytellers, who do not seem to have shared the belief that Elisha experienced a mystical ascension to heaven, locate the incident outside God's earthly dwelling. The reference is anachronistic: Elisha could hardly have been born before the Temple was destroyed.

3. An ominous episode (Babylonian version)

[Rabbi Meir] took [Elisha], and brought him into a schoolhouse. He asked a certain child: "Tell me what verse you've learned."¹²

The child answered: "*There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked [Isaiah 48:22].*"

So he took him to another synagogue. He asked a child there: "Tell me what verse you've learned."

"You may scrub yourself with nitrum; you may use as much soap as you please. Your iniquity is indelibly stained before me, says the Lord God [Jeremiah 2:22]."

He took him to yet another synagogue, and he repeated his request. The child answered: "*What will you do, you ruined creature? Will you dress yourself in scarlet? Will you wear golden jewelry? Will you enlarge your eyes with paint? All in vain do you beautify yourself ... [Jeremiah 4:30].*"

And so he took him to thirteen synagogues, one after another, and each time he received a reply of this sort. He finally said to one child, "Tell me what verse you've learned"; and the child answered: "*But to the wicked God says: What business have you reciting my laws? or speaking about my covenant? [Psalm 50:16].*"

Now, the child had a speech defect. When he said *v'larasha*, "to the wicked," it came out sounding like *v'le'elisha*, "to Elisha": *But to Elisha God says: What business have you reciting my laws? ...* Some say that he had a knife with him, and that he cut the child into pieces and sent those pieces to the thirteen synagogues.

(But others say: He only *said*, "If I had a knife, I'd have cut him to pieces.")

4. Speculations: how did it happen? (Palestinian version)

How did Elisha fall into heresy?

It once happened that he was sitting studying in the valley of Gennesaret. He saw a man climb to the top of a tree [where there was a bird's nest containing a mother and

¹² Meir wants to find out whether there is hope for Elisha. So he resorts to a method of fortune-telling. He -- or perhaps Elisha -- accosts a schoolchild at random and asks him what Biblical verse he has just studied. He then supposes that the verse emerging from the child's innocent mouth is, in effect, God's answer to his question. (You might get the same effect nowadays by opening a Bible at random and putting your finger on the page with your eyes closed.) The replies they get, of course, are not quite what Meir has hoped for.

her chicks]. The man took both the mother and her chicks,¹³ and climbed down safely. The next day he saw another man climb to the top of a tree, take the chicks only, and release the mother. When the man reached the ground, a snake bit him and he died.

Elisha recalled that the Bible says: *You must certainly set the mother free, and take only the chicks. Thus you will have a good life and a long one* [Deuteronomy 22:7]. What happened, he wondered, to this man's *good life*? What happened to his *long life*? Unfortunately, Elisha was not aware of the interpretation Rabbi Jacob had already given the passage: *Thus you will have a good life -- in the next world, which is entirely good. And a long one -- in the future life, where everything lasts long.* [And so he fell into heresy.]

Others tell a different story. Once Elisha saw in a dog's mouth the tongue of Rabbi Judah the Baker, dripping blood. "This is the Torah," he said, "and this is its reward? This is the tongue that faithfully declared the Torah's words? This is the tongue that never tired of speaking Torah? This is the Torah, and this is its reward? Clearly enough, there is no reward. Clearly enough, there is no resurrection."

And some say that his mother passed by a pagan temple while she was pregnant with him. The smell of the pagan sacrifices entered her nostrils and spread through her body like a snake's venom.

5. Elisha's death (Palestinian version)

Some time later, Elisha fell ill. They told Rabbi Meir: "Your teacher is sick." He went to visit him, and found that he was indeed sick.

"Aren't you going to repent?" he asked him.

"Is a sickbed repentance acceptable, do you suppose?"

"The Bible says," he replied, "*You turn a person into powder, and you say, Return, you children of men* [Psalm 90:2]. Until the very moment the soul is turned to powder, repentance will be accepted."

Elisha burst out crying, and died. Rabbi Meir was well pleased, thinking that his teacher had died repentant.

¹³ Thus violating the law of Deuteronomy 22:6-7, quoted below.

After Elisha was buried, fire came down from heaven and burned his grave. They told Rabbi Meir: "Your teacher's grave is on fire." Rabbi Meir went to visit it, and found it ablaze.

What did Rabbi Meir do? He took off his cloak and spread it over the grave. He recited the verse: *Spend the night here. When morning comes, if the Good One wants to redeem you -- let him redeem you. And if he doesn't want to redeem you -- then, by God, I will redeem you* [Ruth 3:13].¹⁴

Which he understood as follows:

Spend the night here -- this refers to the present world, which is dark as night.

When morning comes -- this refers to the future world, which is all one long morning --

If the Good One -- this is God, who is good, of whom the Bible says that *he is good to all, and has mercy on all his creation* [Psalm 145:9] --

If he wants to redeem you -- let him redeem you.

And if he doesn't want to redeem you -- then, by God, I [Rabbi Meir] will redeem you!

The flames died down.

6. Elisha's death (Babylonian version)

When "the Other One" died, it was ruled [in heaven] that he was not to be punished, but was not to be allowed into the next world. He would not be punished, because he had busied himself with Torah. But he would not be allowed into the next world, because he was a sinner.

Rabbi Meir said: "He'd be better off being punished, and then allowed into the next world. When I die, I will make smoke rise from his grave."¹⁵

When Rabbi Meir died, smoke rose from "the Other One's" grave.

¹⁴ This is a thinkable, though rather strained, way to construe the Hebrew. (The Revised Standard Version translates -- correctly, as far as the Biblical context is concerned -- "Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will do the part of the next of kin for you, well; let him do it; but if he is not willing to do the part of the next of kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will do the part of the next of kin for you.") In the Bible, these words are spoken by Boaz to Ruth, who has just lain down next to him and asked him to "spread your robe over your maidservant" (3:9). This certainly helps explain Rabbi Meir's gesture.

¹⁵ Indicating that Elisha is being purged of his sins by fire.

[A hundred years or so later, smoke was still rising from his grave.] Rabbi Yochanan said: "That was a fine trick [of Meir's], to roast his teacher! The man was right here among us, and we couldn't save him. But if I were to take him by the hand [and bring him with me to Paradise], who is there who could snatch him away from me?" He added: "When I die, I will make the smoke stop rising from his grave."

When Rabbi Yochanan died, smoke stopped rising from "the Other One's" grave.

The speaker [at Rabbi Yochanan's funeral] began his eulogy: "Even the gatekeeper [of hell] could not stand up to you, our teacher."

7. Epilogue (Palestinian version)

People said to Rabbi Meir: "If they were to give you the choice, whom would you go to visit in the next world -- your father, or your teacher?"

"I'd go to see my teacher first of all, and afterwards my father."

"And do you think they would listen to you?"

He said to them: "Is it not a principle of ours that a case containing a holy book is to be rescued [from fire on the Sabbath], along with the book itself? That a phylactery-case is to be rescued along with the phylacteries themselves? Just so, Elisha 'the Other One' will be rescued by virtue of his Torah."

Long afterward, Elisha's daughters came to Rabbi Judah the Patriarch to request that they be sustained from communal charity. Rabbi Judah ruled [using the words of Scripture]: *Let no one show him [Elisha] any kindness. Let no one have pity on his orphans [Psalm 109:12].*

"Rabbi," they said, "do not consider his deeds. Consider instead his Torah."

Rabbi Judah burst into tears, and ruled that they be given communal support. "Here was a man," he said, "who immersed himself in Torah for reasons that were not particularly godly, and look what he produced!¹⁶ If someone immerses himself in Torah for its own sake, think how much more he can accomplish!"

¹⁶ The reference is not clear. Perhaps Rabbi Meir is intended; perhaps Elisha's daughters, who evidently have impressed Rabbi Judah. The parallel story in the Babylonian Talmud (*Hagigah* 15b), more dramatically, has fire come down from heaven during the conversation and lick Rabbi Judah's chair.