

# RELIGION AND SKEPTICISM

I DENY  
ADONAI  
I DUNNO

## The Talmud's Atheist

### Rabbi Elisha Ben Avuyah's Challenge to Judaism

One sabbath afternoon, some two thousand years ago, Rabbi Elisha ben Avuyah was studying Torah when he looked up and saw a man climbing a palm tree. The fellow had apparently spotted some birds' nests and was breaking the sabbath law to raid them. He seized both a fledgling and its mother — another violation of *halokhe* (Jewish law), which commands hunters to let mother birds go free — and then clambered down safely and hurried off with his prizes.

Hours later, after the sabbath had ended, Rabbi Elisha again looked up to see another man approaching the same stand of trees. This man, too, climbed and took a young bird from its nest, but shooed the mother away. As he descended, he was bitten by a deadly snake, and by the time he reached the ground, the venom had done its work.

Elisha was horrified. He knew by heart the text about bird catchers in *Deuteronomy*, which was unambiguous: "Let the mother go and take only the young, that you may fare well and have a long life." How could it be that God, the supposed author of that text, had struck down the pious one and allowed the law-breaker to escape?

These events triggered a crisis of faith in Elisha that plunged him into heresy and sin. On a subsequent sabbath, he went out and beckoned to a prostitute. Up close, she recognized

her customer and hesitated. "Aren't you the sage, Elisha ben Avuyah?" He responded by pulling a radish from a furrow — a blatant sabbath violation — and handing it to the woman. "Clearly," she concluded, "he is *akher*, another."

*Known ever after as Akher, Rabbi Elisha ben Avuyah* was a *tanna*, one of the Jewish religious authorities of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE. He lived in the valley of Gennesar, not far from Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, and is named in the Talmud as a young contemporary of such luminaries as Akiva and Tarfon (the latter often quoted by activists for saying, "It is not your job to finish the task, yet you are not free to desist from it"). Akher's best-known student was Rabbi Meir, who maintained a devotion to his teacher long after Akher became an outcast.

Akher's actual teachings are little quoted, but he is portrayed as a savvy interpreter of scripture — and as a man marked for Divine punishment. Passages in both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds describe him riding a horse through the marketplace in violation of the sabbath and conducting a debate with his student Meir in an affectionate, wistful tone:

Elisha: "What other verse did you expound?"

Rabbi Meir: "'Gold and glass cannot equal it . . .'" (Job 28:17).

Elisha: "What did you say about it?"

Rabbi Meir: "These are the words of Torah — they are as difficult to acquire as vessels of gold . . . and are as readily destroyed as vessels of glass."

Elisha: "By God, even as readily as earthenware vessels! But your teacher Akiva would not have spoken thus. He would have said: 'As vessels of gold and even vessels of glass can be repaired if broken, so can a disciple of the wise recover his learning if it has disintegrated.'"

(Bialik and Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends*)

Following this exchange, Meir begs his teacher to end his sinning and become again "a disciple of the wise." Even when Akher makes the effort, however, bad omens pursue him and bar his way to *tshuve* (repentance). Visiting a variety of schools with



Meir, Akher is confronted again and again by children quoting verses about evil-doing. One of them even mispronounces the phrase *ve-la-rasha* (“and unto the wicked”) to sound like *ve-le-Elisha* (“and unto Elisha”). Despite Meir’s loyal efforts to bring his teacher back into the Jewish fold, the heavens seem arrayed against Elisha Ben Avuyah.

**What was the nature of Akher’s heresy?** *The Talmud* observes disapprovingly that he was a student of Greek music and philosophy; that he read forbidden books; that he would discourage young students from pursuing scholarship by urging them to do something worldly like acquiring a craft. The Palestinian Talmud also charges Akher with betraying Jewish leaders to the Roman authorities during the reign of Hadrian, whose persecutions triggered the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132 CE.

“Some say,” reports another passage, that Aher became a heretic “when he saw a pig dragging along in its mouth the tongue of Rabbi Hutzpit the Interpreter,” the eldest of ten rabbinic leaders whom the Midrash says were murdered by Hadrian. (Hutzpit was best known for explaining the language of Torah to the common people.) This passage makes no suggestion of betrayal or guilt on Akher’s part, only shock at seeing the tongue of an eloquent rabbi in the maw of a swine.

These not-quite-credible details aside, the story of Akher is that of a man who becomes an atheist by witnessing injustice in our world. The promise made in the Torah text (“that you may fare well and have a long life”) is violated before his eyes, which leads him to doubt that sinners get punished and the pious get requited. Elisha deliberately breaks the law as a provocation to God (“may lightning strike me down!”) — and God fails the test.

By including this story among its many tales about the rabbis’ lives, the compilers of the Talmud seem to be expressing confidence about their capacity to reveal the folly of atheism. Yet their attacks on Akher are strangely weak and ineffectual, at least to a modern reader. First, they defame his parents: His mother, they say, when pregnant with him, ate meat from the burnt offerings of an idolatrous

temple, and the food “permeated her innards like the venom of a snake”; his father, a notable citizen of Jerusalem, was obsessed, they say, with frivolous interests. The sins of the parents, these texts imply, corrupted the son from birth.

Second, the rabbis resort to an otherworldly theology to redeem their God. Elisha, they explain, “was unaware how Rabbi Akiva had explained [the passage from Deuteronomy]: ‘that you may fare well,’ in the world-to-come, which is wholly good; ‘and have a long life’ in the world-to-come, which goes on without end.” In other words, rewards and punishments are indeed a part of the structure of the universe — but they are meted out in the afterlife, not in this life.



In making this argument, the rabbis take a major leap from the here-and-now theology of the Bible, which does not even mention an afterlife. (The Biblical God lowers the boom on sinners while their sins are still being digested!) To contend with Elisha’s critique, they create an otherworldly Judaism, in which, as another rabbi puts it (*Avot* 4:16), all of our world is but “a vestibule before the world to come.”

Such escapism was probably inevitable for a people who had been devastated in two wars against the Roman Empire and had lost their land, their greatest leaders, and hundreds of thousands of their citizens. In those first two centuries CE, when most of the conversations recorded in the Talmud were taking place, otherworldliness was a balm and a prophylactic against atheism.



*Akher's tale is a piece of theodicy, i.e., an attempt* to reconcile the belief in a good and all-powerful God with the existence of evil and the suffering it causes. For Akher, having witnessed a living disproof of a Torah text, something's got to give: Either God is not wholly good or wholly powerful, or evil has a righteous purpose and suffering is somehow deserved — or the world has no cosmic moral structure and no God.

These possibilities have been part of Jewish theological reckoning over the centuries. In Akher's own period, suffering was commonly explained as the wages of sin: "There is no death without sin, no suffering without transgression," declared the 3<sup>rd</sup> century's Rabbi Ammi in one of the more blunt formulations of this viewpoint in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 55a).

Other theologies, notably in the Jewish mystical tradition, suggested that there might be two contending powers in the universe, God and the *Sitra Akhara*, the "Other Side." Such dualism was opposed throughout the centuries by rabbinical authorities, yet their own insistence on the "unity" of God implies, unsatisfactorily, that God has a monstrous aspect, a taste for calamity, death and disaster that is beyond human comprehension.

Indeed, the 12<sup>th</sup> century's Maimonides taught that Divine "goodness" is simply a trait *we* ascribe to God, who is, after all, unknowable — but utterly real. Evil itself is perhaps *less* real, in Maimonides' view, because it is a human product, correlative of free will: "We suffer because of evils that we have produced ourselves of our free will," he wrote in

his *Guide to the Perplexed*.

Arguments such as these begin to circumscribe the power of God by carving out a badlands region that is exclusively a human domain. Contemporary theologians have taken this further, in such works as Rabbi Harold Kushner's 1981 bestseller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, which essentially absolves God of responsibility for human suffering. "I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it," wrote Kushner, "more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason."

For most atheists, however, such efforts to create a compelling theodicy and salvage a belief in God feel tortuous. In the marvelous 1939 novel, *As a Driven Leaf*, by Rabbi Milton Steinberg — who assembled the fragmentary material about Elisha ben Avuyah into a rich historical fiction — Akher himself says it most pointedly, "with a terrible quiet in his voice": "It is all a lie . . . There is no reward. There is no Judge. There is no Judgment. For there is no God."

*The seeds of Jewish secularism are thus planted* in the Talmud itself. By presenting Akher's heresy and then failing to undermine it convincingly, the compilers of these texts, some fifteen centuries years ago, preserved elements of doubt and disbelief that would blossom in modern times. They did so despite being confronted in their own time by a Jewish heresy that had become the dominant Roman faith — Christianity — and by the Theodosian Code, the 5<sup>th</sup>-century codification of Roman law that made Jews into second-class citizens.

Rather than enacting a fantasy revenge on all heretics by wiping the Talmud clean of Akher, the rabbis actually chose to grant honor and sustenance to his descendants. His daughter is portrayed, after her father's death, petitioning Judah the Patriarch, the rabbinic leader of his era, for material support. "Remember [Elisha's] Torah, not his deeds," she urges Judah — and the heavens punctuate her plea by lapping his bench with fire. **JC**



Richard Codor, from *Babushkin's Catalogue of Jewish Inventions*

**In Remembrance of**

**NETTIE GOLDSTEIN**

**FARBER**

*Her memory gives us reason  
to celebrate not only her life,  
but the joy she brought to ours as well.  
We carry her love forever.*

**Al & Ann Wasserman & Families**