Elisha ben Abuya: Torah and the Sinful Sage

Jeffrey L. Rubenstein

New York University

The figure of Elisha ben Abuya or “Aher,” the Other, has long fascinated the Jewish imagination. Elisha is variously considered an arch-heretic, atheist, gnostic or apostate, but always a sage whose abandonment of Torah so affected his rabbinic colleagues that they could no longer bear to mention his name. This unfavorable picture of Elisha is a composite produced from interpretations of the tradition of the “Four who entered the pards” (found in the Tosefta), the curious epithet “Aher,” later traditions of Elisha from the two Talmuds and midrashic collections, and the tendency of the folk imagination (and scholarly imagination as well) to create stereotypical villains. If the sources are considered independently,

1 I would like to thank Elliot Wolfson, Michael Satlow, Lawrence Schiffman, Baruch Levine and David Greenstein for their comments and bibliographical references.

2 Already B. Gurion, “‘Erekh ‘Aher,” Ha-Goren 7 (1912), 81, realized that the rabbinic traditions are “an attempt to create a figure of religious opposition” and a “symbol” of heresy, apostasy and rejection. For the (re-)constructions of scholars see H. Graetz, Gnosticismus und Judenthum (Krotoschin: B.L. Monasch, 1846), 62–71 and Geschichte der Juden, ed. F. Rosenthal (Leipzig: Oskar Leiner, 1893), 4:93–94, 158–161; Milton Steinberg, As a Driven Leaf (New York: Berman House, 1939); L. Finkelstein, Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr (Cleveland and New York: Meridian, 1962), 163–164, 255–256. And see the interesting composite picture constructed by Aharon Hyman, Toledot Tannaim ve-’Amoraim (Jerusalem: Qiryat Ne’amana, 1916), 155–157. For other references see the bibliography at the end of Ginzberg’s article and the survey of Gurion, pp. 82–83, which reveals a tendency among maskilim to rehabilitate Elisha. For criticism of the distorted reconstructions of early scholars see already P. Smolenskin, “‘Am ‘Olam,” Ha-Shakhar 3 (1876), 644–47, who recognized
however, different views emerge. Each Talmud contains an extended narrative of Elisha that presents a complex picture of the sage, a picture not as unambiguously negative as the popular image. Unfortunately, these talmudic narratives have received little scholarly attention to this point, for scholars have focused on the cryptic Toseftan tradition as the key to understanding Elisha's sin in particular and the nature of rabbinic esoteric activity in general. This study is devoted to the talmudic narratives of Elisha found in yHag 2: 1, 77b–c and bHag 15a–b. It makes no contribution to the ongoing debate over the meaning of the Toseftan story except insofar as it sheds light on how each Talmud interpreted the passage. Nor does it make any claims regarding the "historical" Elisha ben Abuya, but only Elisha ben Abuya as represented by the talmudic texts. The goal is to understand each story of Elisha on its own terms and to assess its meaning for the rabbis who preserved and retold it.

While the stories of the Palestinian Talmud (PT) and Babylonian Talmud (BT) share many episodes in common, they are sufficiently different to require separate analysis. Sections I and II begin with the PT account and present an analysis of its structure, sources and literary features followed by a close reading of the story. Section

that later rabbis having no first-hand knowledge of Elisha attributed all sorts of sins to him.

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3 Several scholars have recognized that the talmudic traditions have little historical basis. See Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," HTR 88 (1995), 114–119, 126–129. Henry Fischel, Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 113, writing of the PT tradition, comments on "strong legendary features: the anonymity of the event, the ingenious evasions and betrayals, the artificiality of the plot." Louis Ginzberg, "Elisha ben Abuyah," The Jewish Encyclopedia (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1912), 5:138–139, realized that the beginning of the BT tradition has no historical worth, but he insisted that the traditions in the PT "are no doubt based on reliable tradition." I.H. Weiss, Dor Dor ve-Dorshav (Vilna, 1911), 2:127–129, noted that rabbinic traditions embellish Elisha's sins in unrealistic ways and present contradictory and irreconcilable images of the sage. (He nonetheless proceeds to discern the "true" sins of Elisha on the basis of those same traditions.)

4 My methodological debt to Jonah Fraenkel, who pioneered the literary study of rabbinic stories, should be obvious. See his "Hermeneutic Problems in the Study of the Aggadic Narrative," Tarbiz 47 (1978), 139–172 (Hebrew) and Darkhe ha-'Aggada ve-ba-Midrash (Masada: Yad la-Talmud, 1991).