

THE APOSTATE OF THE TALMUD.

BY BERNARD M. KAPLAN, M. A.

THE strangest and most peculiar character of the great Hebrew Classic, the Talmud, is certainly Elisha Ben Abuya, surnamed Acher (Another). He was Rabbi and renegade, sage and sinner, patriot and pervert, all in one, an odd combination, indeed. That Rab Ashi, the compiler of the Babylonian Talmud, did not eliminate the unsavory name of Acher from the illustrious pages of that great work indicates quite clearly that the Talmud was edited not merely as a code of laws and as a supplement to the Bible, but rather as a national encyclopædia which mirrors the ancient Jewish life in all its phases and manifestations. Of these some are cheerful and some gloomy, some sublime and some ordinary, some ideal and some material, but all, none the less, interesting and at times highly instructive.

The Talmud relates that one Sabbath day Elisha Ben Abuya accosted a woman of ill repute. "Are you not Elisha Ben Abuya?" she asked in surprise. Elisha made no reply. He plucked a plant from the garden bed and handed it to her. "Ah!" she remarked, "that cannot be Elisha Ben Abuya; that must be Acher." And, indeed, he was no longer Elisha Ben Abuya, the honored sage and respected Rabbi. No! he was another, the notorious Acher. He renounced the faith of his fathers, denounced his former colleagues and informed against them to the cruel and unrelenting Roman spies, who like bloodhounds followed the tracks of the teachers of the Law in woods and caves and had them executed at the command of Hadrian as enemies of idolatry, vice, and despotism. He ridiculed the Law with the sarcasm and contempt of an Eisenmenger and, in consequence, trampled upon morality. He was indeed Acher, Another.

Curiously enough, Acher was not persecuted nor in any way molested by his zealous contemporaries. His vast fund of Jewish

lore, though looked upon with suspicion by some, was much admired generally, notwithstanding the fact that the possessor of it was dreaded by all as the bitter enemy of the Law and its teachers. Such were the respect and admiration for learning in those remarkable and romantic days of the development of the Talmud. Acher even had a very celebrated and pious Rabbi as his admiring Boswell and constant companion.

With his ears pricked up, Rabbi Meir listened eagerly to the Words of Wisdom which often rushed to the surface of Acher's lips from the hidden recesses of his brain, where they had been stowed away in the happier days of his youth before the heavy stones of Roman persecution on the one hand, and Gnosticism on the other obstructed their natural flow. Acher's very apostasy is related by the sages in an almost subdued tone of reverence and awe. The various incidents of his life, as described in the Talmud, are surrounded by such wild and picturesque growths of metaphor and allegory that one has to brush aside many a shrub, and many a blade of grass, before reaching the crystal waters of the well.

I.

Elisha was born in Jerusalem, of wealthy and highly respected parents, towards the end of the first century of the Common Era. Abuya, the happy father, was so prominent and so popular that the initiation of his child into the Abrahamic Covenant was celebrated as a great religious and social event by all the leading and learned men of Jerusalem. The destruction of the Temple was still fresh in the memories of the people and brought tears to the eyes of every Jew as though the firebrands were still smouldering. The happy occasion of the B'rith, however, called for rejoicing and thanksgiving. A new recruit was born to fight idolatry and superstition; a new standard-bearer of the true faith,—the faith of the Patriarchs and the Prophets.

Abuya invited all the great and wise men of the city; and great, indeed, must have been their number, for two houses were necessary to accommodate them all. The day was spent in feasting and in intellectual intercourse; for to feast without discoursing on the Law, is like "partaking of the sacrifices of dead idols." So intense was the delight of the occasion, so overpowering the joy, that Abuya fell into a state of rapturous emotion. He saw columns of fire like the traditional flames of Sinai, encircling the house in which the wise and the learned were discoursing on the

beauty of holiness, and the holiness of the Law. Never before did he realise to the fullest extent the meaning of the words of Rabbi Eliezer: "Warm thyself by the fire of the wise," as on this happy occasion, when he sat in the full glow of so many wise men of whom Eliezer himself was one. "If such be the charm of the Law," vowed Abuya, "I shall dedicate my child to its study." . . . "Because his intentions were not directed heavenward, his wish was not realised," are the concluding words of the glowing report of that remarkable B'rith as related in the Talmud. In vain did the pious Rabbis repeat the customary felicitations, "Even as he has entered into the covenant, so may he grow up to a knowledge of the Law, to a holy wedlock, and to good deeds." In vain! In vain were all their wishes and prayers for the child: the father's intentions were not directed heavenward.

II.

The guests dispersed quietly and soberly. As they neared the ruins of the Temple, the memory of the smouldering firebrands again brought tears to their eyes. Their zeal for the Law and for the land was kindled afresh; none of the sanguinary and drastic measures of the Romans could quench it. It was a long time since they had rejoiced in a body. They hung their heads in sad silence as they pondered over the causes of the prevailing depression and gloom. Were there no longer men in Israel possessed of genuine Maccabean courage, who would wrest the land from the enemy and rekindle the Jewish spirit and the "Perpetual Lamp?" A deep sigh of apparent shame echoed from their brooding breasts as they repeated the words of the Weeping Prophet, "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?"

Pausing before the Western Wall, they prostrated themselves to the ground and spontaneously vowed the national vow with the firm determination to fulfil it. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." If they were too old to do more than stop an arrow, they resolved, at least, to encourage and stir up the young to enter into a new struggle for the glory of God and the good of the nation.

III.

The Bar-Kochba rebellion was a terrible and desperate struggle for liberty and independence. The revolt was long and stub-

born. A handful of people, young and old, resisted Hadrian for nearly three years with true Maccabean valor. This time, however, might and numbers prevailed. The last Hebrew stronghold, Bither, fell, and with it was crushed every hope of ever regaining the land by force. Israel's power was discovered to lie not in body but in spirit. The appalling martyrdom which attended this "war of extermination," as the Talmud styles it, proved it conclusively.

Hadrian was now determined to extinguish the last spark of Jewish patriotism. Like Epiphanes, the Syrian tyrant, he traced the secret springs of the Jewish national spirit to Israel's religious customs and the Law. He sought to sever by fire and sword the Gordian knot which tied the Jew to the Holy Land. Were it not for the romanticism and the idealism, which form a halo about this troublous period, the tale of the Jewish martyrdom under the Roman persecution would be too appalling to relate in a more humane age. Suffice it to say that the Spanish Inquisition was not more cruel. No more need be said; no more can be said.

IV.

Whether Elisha took an active part in the Bar-Kochba uprising or not, his contemporaries do not say. There was no Josephus then to record details. One thing, however, is certain; the indescribable tortures and persecutions which followed the unhappy struggle had a decidedly dark influence on Elisha's mind. He saw the greatest, the wisest, and the purest men of his faith pierced by lances, cast into fire, or torn into pieces by Romans and beasts; and for what? For maintaining schools for the study of the Jewish religion, and for observing the Law,—deeds which, to the apostate's sense of justice, should have drawn a reward from heaven and admiration from fellow-men. But what the admiration, and what the reward? While proclaiming with all the fervor of his soul the Unity of God, the lovable and saintly Akiba was literally torn into pieces. Judah Ben Baba, in order to elude the vigilance of the Roman spies, gathered the surviving disciples of Akiba in a secluded valley to ordain them as teachers of the Law, that they might continue the task of their martyred master. No sooner had he laid his feeble hands on the first aspirant for spiritual knighthood than a force of the benighted persecutors appeared in the valley. When they withdrew, the aged teacher lay pierced to the heart, with his noble countenance mutilated beyond recognition, with his white flowing beard bespattered with blood, surrounded by the lifeless bodies of his young followers, like so many spring flowers adorn-

ing an old grave. No mourners were allowed to follow the remains of that grand old teacher to the Beth Olom, no mark of honor was permitted to be shown, not a word of eulogy to be uttered. A namesake of Elisha was sentenced to have his skull crushed, because he had put on Phylacteries. To use the language of a contemporary, "the Jews were flogged for shaking the Lulab on the Feast of Tabernacles; crucified for eating Matzoth on Passover, and executed for reading the Law." Elisha saw the tongue of Chuzpit, the eloquent and learned Rabbi, dragged in the mouth of a swine. The sight filled him with horror. He turned away in disgust and cried, "Shall the mouth that was filled with the pearls of the Law lick the ground? Shall the tongue that interpreted the holy Law be dragged in the filthy mouth of a swine? Is that indeed the tongue of the Meturgemon that busied itself with religious truth? Alas! It is that tongue! That is the Law, and this is its reward! There is no reward and no resurrection!"—"He went and sinned," concludes the Talmud.

Oh, thou Renegade! Apostate! Pervert! What wouldst thou have said hadst thou lived at a much later age and seen, not the tongue of Chuzpit in the mouth of the swine, but the tongue of the swine in the mouth of Chuzpit?

v.

The excuse that Boccaccio assigns for the conversion of Abraham of Paris might have afforded the grounds for Elisha's apostasy. No doubt, the prosperity and glory of the Romans on the one hand, and the Jewish persecutions on the other, shook Elisha's faith in the God of his fathers; but what led him to immorality, and why did he turn informer against his people?

Spinoza ignored Judaism, but never opposed the Jew; Heine renounced the faith of his fathers, but never ceased to admire "the dough from which Gods are made." Acher possessed neither the philosophic calmness of Spinoza nor the poetic instincts of Heine; but was he so impervious to the appreciation of the sublime and the heroic as not to admire a people that subjected itself to the greatest sufferings for the sake of an ideal? That people certainly did not merit the hostility of one who so well knew its inner life and aspirations.

The immorality of Acher must be traced to the Gnosticism of the time, which surely exercised a powerful influence on his active intellect and his ardent passions, no longer bridled by the moral guidance of the Hebrew Law. Gnosticism, the last flicker of dy-

ing Paganism, flashed a gleam which afforded temporary light and warmth to the groping, shivering skeptics of the expiring ancient world. It was an eclectic religion for the aristocratic classes. The discontented and restless spirits of Judaism, Christianity, and Paganism, had formulated doctrines and beliefs which were both sublime and grotesque. Only the most subtle minds were deemed capable of initiation into and the appreciation of its deep mysteries and mysticisms.

Gnosticism not only accommodated the one sided intellects of its aristocratic followers, but it also afforded a moral sanction for the immoralities of its effeminate Oriental votaries. The Oriental followers of the new accommodating and elastic faith, who viewed the associate god Demiurgos as the rival of the Supreme Being, abandoned themselves to the grossest sensualities in order to show their utter disregard for the rule and power of Demiurgos. They believed that just as the Supreme Being, the Pure Abstraction, was not in touch with the material world—as Gnosticism taught—so their souls were not affected by the acts of their bodies.

The followers of Gnosticism were active in the promulgation of their doctrines both by mouth and pen. The Talmudic teachers generally refer to their writings as "*sifre minim*," the works of heretics and delators, and speak of them with the contempt which they deserve. Some of the Talmudists, like Elisha, were, however, attracted to their fascinating and tempting doctrines, perhaps at first as a matter of curiosity. Rabbi Akiba alone, guided by the thread of his faith, emerged safely from the Gnostic labyrinth. Not even numbers were proof against the overwhelming charm of the siren voices of Gnosticism.

Four Rabbis, Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Akiba, and Acher, relates the Talmud allegorically, entered Pardes, the garden of mystic speculation. Ben Azzai "cast a glance upward," and died in the bloom of life. Ben Zoma was "struck in the mind," as Rashi puts it. Akiba "entered in peace and departed in peace." Acher "cut down the plants." Some phenomena appeared to him to be conflicting and irreconcilable. "Possibly there are two Powers in Heaven," was Acher's line of speculation, according to the Talmud. His step from the metaphysical side of Gnosticism to the moral, or rather immoral, phase of it was rapid and pronounced.

VI.

Why did Acher persecute his former co-religionists? No direct explanation is given in the Talmud, as far as I know, of the

unusual attitude of the apostate towards the people of his own flesh and blood.

Dr. H. Oppenheim, the learned Rabbi of Thorn, Prussia, thought that at the bottom of Elisha's strange consciousness lay a deeply rooted plan of doing away forever with the awful miseries, persecutions, and tortures of the Jews by destroying their faith and their identity, in the same way as the ingenious and resourceful apostate Solomon Levi, of Burgos, like the bear in the fable, aimed at killing the tormenting fly, though the skull of the beloved master be crushed with it.

Acher certainly did not seek to ingratiate himself in the eyes of Hadrian by acting as informer against the Jewish teachers; nor did he bear an inner hatred for his former co-religionists with whom he continued to associate to the end of his life. Considering the indescribable persecutions which the Jews suffered for the sake of their faith, one might almost feel inclined to forgive Acher of Jerusalem and Acher of Burgos for preferring spiritual suicide for their race to perpetual torture and misery. And, indeed, when the few surviving scholars met in the garret of Lydda to consider the future of Israel, did not the pious and saintly Ishmael himself suggest absolute cessation from conjugal life, in other words, national suicide, as a plausible remedy against the never ending evils and misfortunes of the Jewish race? Is it to be wondered then that the Gnostic Elisha should have thought of spiritual suicide as the most effectual remedy against the never-ceasing persecutions of Israel? It was not, indeed, the Law of Israel that Elisha scorned, but rather the lawlessness of the Romans that he dreaded. "Be a tailor or a carpenter," was his advice to the students of the Law on his occasional visits to the Jewish academies. Acher would have had the children of Israel either nurtured by the wolf that nursed the founders of Rome, or destroyed even as were the children on the road to Beth-El at the instigation of his great namesake, the prophet.

VII.

The noble part that the illustrious Rabbi Meir played in the life of Elisha forms the silver lining to the dark cloud of Acher's career. Meir, a pious Rabbi, and one of the most lovable characters in the Talmud, remained the bosom friend of the much dreaded Acher to the very last. Eager to benefit by his vast erudition, and still more anxious for his "return," this celebrated sage clung to Acher like an ivy which both supports and is in turn supported.

One Sabbath day Acher was riding on horseback, and Rabbi Meir was following alongside, as the Talmud says, "to learn Torah from his mouth." When they had covered a Tchum (a distance of 2000 feet from the city limits beyond which a Jew is not supposed to walk on the Sabbath), Acher exclaimed: "Meir, turn back! By the steps of my animal I notice that here is the Tchum limit."—"You, too, turn back," retorted Rabbi Meir suggestively. "I told you long ago that I had heard a mysterious voice, 'Return, O ye backsliding children; all except Acher,'" was his pensive reply.

One day when Rabbi Meir paid his usual visit to Acher's house, he found him dying. With tears in his eyes the Rabbi called upon him to repent. "Would they receive me?" asked the dying man with bated breath. Rabbi Meir quoted from the Psalm: "Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men." Tears trickled down Acher's wan cheek. He turned his head towards his beloved friend and pupil; but his eyes only stared, and he spoke no more. "He has returned! He has returned!" cried Rabbi Meir, as he saw his master breathe his last.

VIII.

Rabbi Meir paid periodic visits to Acher's resting place. At one time it was reported to him that smoke had been seen ascending from the apostate's grave. Rabbi Meir hastened to the spot and spread his flowing robe over the grave. "Repose, repose here in the night," he said. "In the dawn of bliss the grace and love of God will save thee. I shall be thy redeemer."