

In "As A Driven Leaf", by Milton Steinberg, Elisha ben Abuyah is portrayed as a prominent Rabbi who eventually leaves his faith for atheism and Greek culture. Steinberg did an admirable job of adapting the source material to tell a compelling narrative, however in doing so he made a number of changes. For example, he reinterpreted the Talmudic story of how, at his circumcision, Elisha's father wished him to be a Rabbi, but for the wrong reasons, and changed his father into a non-believer himself. Most of these narrative reinterpretations were somewhat minor and aided in the retelling; I particularly enjoyed the interpretation of the 'four who entered the Pardes'. However, one element struck me in particular as being a large digression from the source. In the book, Elisha is portrayed as an atheist. But seemingly for the historical Elisha this was not the case.

In Chazal, we find many parallel reasons given for Elisha's Apostasy. There is the aforementioned story of his circumcision (Yerushalmi Chagiga 9b.) Another reason, found in both Talmudim, is the story of the child dying while performing the mitzva of sending away the mother bird (ibid, Kidushin 39b). Others claim that witnessing the tongue of Chutzpit Hameturgeman being ripped out was too much for Elisha (Kidushin 39b). Further, the Yerushlami portrays him as misinterpreting verses in Job. Leaving aside the story of his circumcision, every

source above points to the identical conclusion: Elisha was terribly bothered by theodicy.

Theodicy, in its standard presentation, is portrayed as a paradox. There are three axioms: God exists, God is good, and God has agency. A contradiction between theology and our observation can be derived if all three axioms are to be accepted, thus at most two of them can be true. Steinberg, taking a cue from the above stories, portrayed Elisha as an atheist, solving theodicy by denying the first axiom, that God exists.

While, for modern man, that may seem like the most natural form of apostasy that theodicy would induce, there was indeed another ancient solution to this problem. Zoroaster, the famed prophet of the near east, solved this issue not with atheism but with dualism. He proposed the existence of two deities, one good, one evil. This solves the problem equally well by undermining the third axiom, that God has agency. By admitting that God is in combat with an evil force and consequently does not control all, the problem of theodicy is neatly solved, even if the conclusion is somewhat disturbing.

While we know that the thought of Zoroaster was present in Palestine at that time, it is impossible to know if indeed Elisha became a Zoroastrian. (I have found several others who have written about Elisha and Zoroaster, but not much more evidence beyond the above was presented. An analysis of exactly how deeply these ideas penetrated Palestine at that time would be very helpful, but I

don't have the resources to conduct this study.) However, we can be certain that he became a dualist. For there is another story given for his apostasy, the story of the Pardes. In that story, Elisha 'cuts the saplings', an oblique reference to some form of heresy. (As an aside, in later Kabbalistic literature, this term is used to refer to one who, by misunderstanding the sefirot, ascribes multiplicity to God.) The Bavli explains that he saw Metatron standing alongside God and was led into thinking there are two powers. Indeed, Metatron is compared to God in other places, and is even said to have the same name as God (Sanhedrin 38b). Thus, it is clear that his solution to theodicy was not atheism but dualism, at least according to the Talmud Bavli.

While the earlier sources in the Yerushalmi did not explicitly say this, since dualism in that era was as likely a solution to theodicy as atheism, it is likely that the view of the Bavli is correct. Elisha was not an atheist but a dualist. Further, if we accept the Hekhalot literature as an authentic, if pseudographical, depiction of the Pardes, a confused theology is far more likely a result of entering the Pardes than the lack of a theology altogether.

While Steinberg's take certainly is more relatable for the modern man, it may serve to portray Elisha as faithless, when in reality he had substituted one faith for another. On the other hand, Steinberg's read is consistent with the Yerushalmi if we ignore the Bavli, so it is not impossible that he is correct. I think I likely would have made a similar decision if placed in Steinberg's shoes, but I

can't help but wonder what the novel would have been like had it gone down a different route.

Judaism lies somewhere between two poles. On the one hand, there is cold rationalism, or perhaps in modern philosophy this may be termed empiricism. This view denies the existence of anything that cannot be demonstrated or proven. While many great thinkers, Maimonides chief among them, attempted to reconcile Judaism and Rationalism, there is not doubt that the two have major differences, both in creed and in focus.

On the other end of the spectrum we find polytheism and mysticism. This view is that of the anti-skeptic. A mystic may believe in many things that are internally inconsistent and irrational, and proof is an unnecessary and wasteful endeavor. Needless to say, Judaism rejects this view as well.

Judaism, in the middle, must mediate between these two positions. It admits not everything can be proven, but further denies that every unprovable belief is equally acceptable. Had Stenberg presented Elisha as a dualist, he could have explored mysticism and polytheism as Judaism's antithesis, as opposed to rationalism. Since Judaism lies somewhere in between these two poles, either one would make for an excellent foil to the rabbinic position.

Indeed, both remain relevant to modern man, albeit in different ways. Elisha as the mystical heretic who reverts to a pagan belief would be an excellent pretext to critique how similar views, often unannounced, creep into our lives and

remain, whether due to cognitive dissonance or because we simply like them. Especially in a post-modern world, where much of rationalism has been called into question, such a retelling would be even more relevant. It would be quite an interesting project to write a short story from this perspective, and I hope someone (me) does it in the near future!