

Acher

- Early-second-century rabbi who left Judaism.
- What did he actually do? Unclear.

Background

- Name: (tanna) Elisha ben Avuyah. Rich family.
- One of the great sages of his day, known for deep insights into Torah.
- After apostasy, referred to as 'Acher' in Talmud – 'the other one'.
- Teacher of (tanna) Rabbi Meir, another great sage, who never gave up on him.

What triggered it?

- His brush with mysticism
 - Four men entered the "orchard": Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and R. Akiba. Ben Azzai gazed and died. Ben Zoma became demented. Acher mutilated the plants [left Judaism]. R. Akiba departed unhurt. (Hagigah 14b)
- He saw promises made in the Torah apparently unfulfilled
 - Deut. 22
 - 6. If a bird's nest happens to be before you...and the mother sitting upon the young..., you shall not take the mother with the young;
 - 7. But you shall let the mother go, and take the young for yourself; that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days.
 - He saw one man break that commandment without coming to harm, and another observe it (and the one about honoring your parents) and get killed. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:16).
 - R. Akiba explained that reward and punishment are sometimes only in the world to come.
- He saw persecution and death as the result of observance
 - During Roman persecutions under Hadrian, he saw the tongue of the great scholar R. Yehudah the Baker in the mouth of a dog, and said,

"Is this the Torah and this its reward?... If this is so, there is no reward for the righteous and no resurrection of the dead.' (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:16, Talmud J, Hag.).

-He saw the tongue of R. Huzpith the Interpreter lying on a dung-heap, then dragged along by a pig, and exclaimed, 'Shall the mouth that uttered pearls lick the dust!' (Chullin 142a, Kiddushin 39b)

-His father is to blame

-Acher said, My father Abuyah said at my circumcision, 'Since the Torah is so powerful, should this child survive me I will dedicate him to the Torah.' Because his intention was not for the sake of Heaven, my study of the Torah did not endure with me. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:16)

-His mother is to blame

-[Some say] when his mother was pregnant with him, she passed by idolatrous temples and smelled [the food offerings to the idols]. They gave her some of that [food] and she ate it, and it burned in her stomach like the venom of a serpent [and it affected him]. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:16)

-His exposure to ideas outside Torah

-Greek song did not leave Acher's mouth. It is told that when he used to rise [to go] from the schoolhouse [before his apostasy], many heretical books used to fall from his lap. (Hagigah 15b)

-Rashi: He violated rule against music after the destruction of the Temple (Git. 7a on Isa. 24:9).

-Maharsha: This does not explain the word 'Greek': the Gemara could have simply stated that song did not leave his mouth. He suggests, therefore, that the Greek songs were tainted by heresy.

-Others: Greek literature led him to accept ideas that are contrary to Jewish teaching.

What did he actually do?

There were many sects in Israel at that time. He became:

-A dualist

'Mutilated the plants' was a codeword for dualism (or Gnosticism): Two gods. In Talmud he says: 'Perhaps, God forbid! there are two divinities!' (Hagigah 15a; upon seeing Metatron sitting in heaven)

-A non-religious person

- An atheist, a "follower of Philo", a lover of Greek philosophy, a philanderer, a "secular humanist", "an epicurean", enjoying the pleasures of this life to the utmost (prostitute gave him name 'Acher')
- Not enough to justify high level of disapproval

-A Sadducee

- He killed Torah scholars [Talmud J., Hag. 2:1]
- He enticed the young away from studying rabbinic Judaism and into more practical pursuits [Talmud J., Hag. 2:1]
- He informed to the Romans against the Jews who tried to remain observant even though the Romans had banned the teaching of Torah [Talmud J., Hag. 2:1]
- He publicly violated laws for spite, as when he rode a horse near the Temple on a Yom Kippur that was also Shabbat, beyond the travel limits. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:16)

-A Christian

- No evidence at all
- "A victim of the inquisitor Akiba" (I do not know what that means)

-Whatever it was, he was convinced no atonement was possible:

- When he rode his horse near the Temple on a Yom Kippur that was also Shabbat [with R. Meir walking behind him to learn Torah from him – Hagigah 15a], he heard a heavenly voice crying out,
"Return, you backsliding children (Jer. 3:22), Return unto Me, and I will return unto you (Mal. 3:7), with the exception of Elisha b. Abuyah who knows My might and yet rebelled against Me!" (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:16)

(If you studied the Torah and know what you must do, forgiveness for lapses is that much more difficult to obtain.) (Deuteronomy Rabbah 7:4)

The aftermath

At Acher's deathbed, R. Meir said to him, 'Return in penitence.'
Acher replied, "Will they accept me after all this?"
At that, Acher burst into tears and died.

And R. Meir rejoiced and said, 'It appears that my master passed away in the midst of repentance... Elisha will be saved... by the merits of his Torah.' [Ruth Rabbah 6:2]

Acher's daughter came before Rabbi and said: O master, support me!

He asked her: "Whose daughter are you?"

She replied: I am Acher's daughter.

Said he: Are any of his children left in the world? Behold, it is written: 'He shall have neither son nor son's son among his people, nor any remaining in his dwellings' [Job 18:19].

She answered: Remember his Torah and not his deeds.

Forthwith, a fire came down and enveloped Rabbi's bench.

[Thereupon] Rabbi wept and said: If it be so on account of those who dishonor her [the Torah], how much more so on account of those who honor her! (Hagigah 15b)

He gave her charity, and her son, Acher's grandson, became a great rabbi in the Talmud, Rabbi Ya'akov ben Korshai [Hullin 142a]. He said,

"This world is like a vestibule before the world to come. Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter the banquet hall... More beautiful is one hour spent in repentance and good deeds in this world than all the life in the world to come, and more beautiful is one hour of the even-tempered spirit in the world to come than all the life of this world." [Pirkei Avot 4:16]

The Talmud records that Rabbi Joseph, a prominent Babylonian rabbi, remarked: Had Acher interpreted the biblical promises as did his daughter's son, he would not have become a sinner (Hullin 142a , Eccl. R. 7:8).

Good reading: Novelized account of Acher's life, based on above: Milton Steinberg's *As a driven leaf*, 1939.