



## Aher [Elisha ben Abuyah] and Jesus

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**Two Jewish figures compared.**

### **Aher (Elisha ben Abuyah) and Jesus**

**by G. David Schwartz**

#### **I.**

How do we compare the "hero" of one culture with a personage from another culture? The comments we make about another are likely to be uninspiring. This is especially the case where the "hero" of one culture is the failure of another. To suggest that an individual is heroic is a superlative term. When a Jew applies thought to Jesus, however, the remark can only be regarded as far short of the mark. If a hero is someone against whom we measure truth, contradictions and antinomies occur because we cannot agree about what is true.

In contemporary times, when competition to find a good example of the type of being we Jews call a "mensch" [a person of integrity, a personable yet effective, caring yet capable, honest yet friendly human being] is so frustrating, why talk about failures? Each of us knows personal failure. Why dwell on it? Surely we search for the man or woman who is a mensch and we cannot feel good knowing the failures of others. Failure surrounds us. Surely this ubiquity of failure makes the bright spots in life - a tender word of encouragement, a sense of humor, and other reprieves from the everyday - all the more healthful. Why, then, go looking for failure? Why highlight failure? Why search the past for failure?

The mission of a human being is, in some sense, to cast light, to enlighten us by their very presence. If so, it is an act of menschhood to enlighten our common past. A malicious person who investigates the past may find a series of monuments to overturn and opportunities for sarcasm. No doubt that person will be doing some stratum of the community a favor. However, for those of us who take the sages' advice seriously - where there is no mensch, strive to be one - there is something more important than facts and derisive laughter. That which is more important is to be a mensch.

For the honest person, the person searching and seeking honesty, of the self and the community, one may prevaricate in a similar manner as is reported of Aaron in the Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, Chapter 12. There it is reported that Aaron once told two quarreling fellows that the other beats his breast and tears his clothes. The story clearly suggests that neither fellow was engaged in beating his chest, rending his garments, or weeping bitter tears because of the fight in which they were engaged. Aaron lied, yet the sages of Israel, those seekers after correct behavior, recommended this behavior! The honest person is one who occasionally lies.

We should soften the paradox. Aaron is not known as a liar but as a priest and a prophet. Indeed, one might say that Aaron saw that, if the two contesting partners allowed their battle to escalate and destroy the partnership, then there would be rending of garments and weeping. With failure all around us, we cannot afford to lose friends. In fact, Aaron's success, the behavior recommended, is that we act so as to mitigate failure. Interestingly, the English word "mitigate" derives from the

Latin mitis, mild, and agre, to drive. Hence, "mitigate" is an oxymoron: to force or compel mildness.

We elect presidents and want them to be heroic. We study legends and hope to find heroes. We talk up our friends in the hopes of associating ourselves with living legendary figures. All we find are various shades of failure. The problem is exacerbated when the hero of one people is little more than the failure of another. The problem is even more terrible when the self-claimed failures of one people are claimed to be more heroic than the heroes of another people.

It seems that today's hero is yesterday's comic figure: our Don Quixote or Jacques the Fatalist, Joseph Andrews or Tevya. A hero is someone against whom we test any application of the truth. Therefore, a hero is an arbitrary assessment of the real. How can we regard any hero as anything less than arbitrary as long as we do not agree on what is true, just, and good?

For Christians, Jesus was and is the Christ, the Son of God, very God of the universe. Even disaffected Christians, typically, are disillusioned with what they regard as outmoded rules and regulations, not with Jesus himself. Accordingly, Jesus is a brilliant personality, a profound moralist, a religious genius. Although Jews resist speaking about Jesus while engaged in the daily practice of Judaism (as diverse as these practices are), and do not feel compelled to speak about Jesus among themselves, and shy away from speaking about him when questioned, Jesus was one gigantic failure. Why should we speak about Jesus among ourselves? He has done nothing for the Jews, and, historically, things done in his name too frequently reverberated to the physical punishment of the Jews at the hands of those who adored and claimed to emulate the savior.

Each of the preceding statements is an exaggeration. Jews do, in fact, speak about Jesus. We Jews even have the unmitigated gall to speak about Jesus to Christians! We speak about our personal impressions of this man, this son of Israel, to people who worship and adore him. This situation is not so much outrageous as odd. When we talk to a people who pray to Jesus, rely on him for the forgiveness of sins and for salvation from this world, who regard Jesus as God of gods and Man above men, we make many superlatively senseless statements. Jesus was "a good man" or a "decent rabbi" or "a pious sage." Occasionally, we risk venturing further: Jesus was prophet-like, a really intelligent fellow, a mensch who should not be blamed if his followers took a "noble idea" and perverted it.

We look for salvation and find want, depravity, frustration, and failure. Too many examples of such behavior have occurred in the name of Jesus.

We do not praise Jesus when we speak to Christians, and we do not bother to denounce Jesus when we speak among ourselves. The question arises as just what, if anything, we are talking about. Denigration of Jesus in the history of Judaic thought has been muted in the contemporary Jew. Historically, we have not failed to call Jesus an apostate, a demon, a fool. These days we keep quiet so as not to offend the Christian majority in the lands in which we live. We want to be quiet about him. Only when pressed, or feeling ourselves pressed, do we offer "good man," "noble Jew," and "pious rabbi." If the truth be known, discussion of Jesus in contemporary Judaic discourse is less important than talk about the sage who was the Talmud's favorite heretic, the scholar who abandoned legitimate scholarship: Elisha ben Abuyah, known as Aher, "the other."

## II.

Ralph P. Martin says that Jesus was "a Jewish rabbi [who] stands in contrast to Paul the apostle to the nations."<sup>(1)</sup> This statement adequately summarized the position at which Jewish thinkers begin and, too often, remain. In order to compare Jesus with the heretic Aher it will be necessary to discuss the historical knowledge we have about Jesus. The following remarks are by no means complete. They are presented simply as a means of raising the issue.

The historical Jesus must be regarded as a Jew with a self-imposed limitation to minister, in some manner, to the land, the people, and the God of Israel. The exclusive preaching in the land of Israel did not require Jesus be a nationalist. The exclusive preaching to the people of Israel may have required that he be critical [read: prophetic]. His exclusive concern with the God of Israel may have required that he be concerned with universal issues and world-historical questions.

Inasmuch as the Reign of God was perceived to be at hand, Jesus was concerned with how he and his disciples would serve, and serve in, the Kingdom of God. If these issues are to be regarded as the limitation of a Jewish perspective of Jesus, there are also conditions that require an extended perspective. The extended perspective may be framed as follows.

1. As noted, Jesus' exclusivistic concern with the universal God required that he think his exclusivism in universal terms. Smaller minds may have generated a ubiquitous nationalism (hints of which are early disregarded, as when Jesus indicated that he thought of the gentile women as a dog; cf. Mt. 15:22-28). Martin seems correct when he says that the church would not have invented such a limitation. (2) What is interesting about Jesus' subsequent reply to the woman was his apparent surprise that she was correct. Jesus' concern with the land, people, and God of Israel was developed into a "startling" concern for moral behavior. We see this occurring through development of Jesus' own moral behavior.

2. The extensive perceptions of Christians concerning what we Jews may regard as the development of Jesus from man to Son of Man to Son of God to very God must ultimately be located in:

a. Jesus' authentic remarks understood, perhaps, as an imperative for an advanced relationship of all that occurs in the (immanent) Reign of God;

b. The relationship between Jesus' words and his understanding of the immanent occurrence of the reign as mediated in the thought of his most active, most vocal follower, Paul. However, we must not superficially understand Paul as an assimilated, hellenized Jew but as one who was genuinely concerned (if misguided) in his quest to overcome the differences between Jew and Greek, male and female, and so on. Are we all one in Christ? We might become "one" in fruitful conversation that would allow - require! - differences. In the "Father's" house, there are many mansions.

c. To understand what is too easily accepted as a deep contrast between the earthy Jewish Jesus and the great reconciler Paul, the best place to begin may be with an understanding of Jesus' resurrection. It may be the case that the resurrection is not to be regarded in a Christian sense. Nor need the resurrection be regarded in a psychological sense. Precisely how the resurrection ought to be understood, as a phenomenon that influenced perceptions, especially the perceptions of Jesus himself, cannot be examined in the present context. Suffice it to say that in death there is neither Jew nor gentile, male nor female, saint nor sinner.

As this brief discussion may indicate, in addition to the two perspectives that occur between Christians and Jews (regarding Jesus as more than merely heroic and regarding him as less than heroic), there is also a distinction between the historical Jesus and the figure of the redeemer. It is senseless to ask which Jesus was heroic and which was not. While not accepting the image of Jesus as meek and sensitive (a meek person did not throw the money changers out of the temple,

and a sensitive person would not call the gentile woman a dog), nor other too-easily-offered suggestions of who Jesus was, the above starting points might be used to determine what may be said about the historical Jesus. We may say that he was concerned with the God, the people, and the land of Israel. Having said this, we say little more than that he was a Jew. We have no evidence with which to answer the question concerning what kind of Jew he might have been: a disciple of the Pharisees, an Essene, a Zealot, a mystic, a humanist, etc. He was a man whose insights and concerns developed.

We may even speculate that the development in Jesus' thoughts occurred more rapidly once Jesus realized that his original message - that the people ought to repent, for the Reign of Heaven was at hand - was false. The Reign was not immanent when Jesus walked the earth, and it does not seem close a hand at the moment. The more religious among us may say many fine things, such as that the reign is at hand whenever a soul sincerely repents and prays, seeks God, and so on. This personalistic insight does not feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, or protect widows and orphans and the sick. At best, it protects the individual. Jesus was an individual who, for the sake of his land, his people, his God, did not concern himself with self-protection.

When the Reign was not manifested, the terms of Jesus' ministry underwent a change. He recognized himself as an unprotected man. The books that contain the message of that change are largely modeled on the thought of Paul, who, it should be noted, was not concerned with the historical Jesus. When Paul rejected knowledge of Christ after the flesh (2 Cor. 5:16), this must be the result of Paul's previous understanding that Jesus now became irrelevant in view of the fact that Paul's expectation of an immanent historical occurrence did not take place. The Parousia did not happen, yet the active mind continued to broaden the query for wisdom and expectation. Hence, the historical Jesus became, simply put, uninterested in comparison with the eschatological figure who was anticipated. Insofar as documents were written that purported to be the life of Jesus, these documents can only be regarded as explanations of how the Pauline Jesus became the savior of the world (although, of course, he was regarded as such "from the beginning").

Not only did Paul become unconcerned with the historical Jesus, but this practice is also touted as the norm. Too frequently the historical concern with Jesus is regarded as a Jewish quest, and the opposite is regarded as a true Christian concern. This is not quite right, first, because there is no opposite to history. Even the divine, according to both Jews and Christians, is concerned with what occurs in this mundane sphere. Second, Karl Rahner has said that it is legitimate for the theologian "to point out the historical problems" entailed by Christian sources in relation to Jesus. Rahner said, however, that if an exegete were to seek to say "with positive and unambiguous historical certainty that the realities supposed here simply did not exist at all, then the premises of fundamental theology and dogmatic theology for the Christian faith would really be destroyed."<sup>(3)</sup> Theologians, then, are legitimately concerned with historical issues.

It seems the Christian must be concerned with the historical Jesus if only because the Christian claim is that, at a certain point in history, God's love became manifest. A Jew, of course, may wish to revert to the personalistic response discussed above and say that God's love becomes manifest whenever a human being feels love for God in his or her soul. However, what is not good for the goose is not good for the gander. The Jew must recognize that the demand to base all issues on history can, at best, be for the sake of uttering a few plausible intuitions. The few points suggested above - issuing in the final point, that a concern with the issue of resurrection must ultimately be discussed - are perhaps all that can be known of the "historical Jesus."

If so, we might as well not discuss any issue based on history, much less the history of this sect or that partisan. The Jew must ultimately agree with the theologian: there is more than we are currently aware of going on in the text. Nor is the "more going on" to be elucidated by endless discussions of what this or that word or phrase means, whether Jesus really spent time in Jerusalem, how many years he preached, how old he was when he died, and so on. These are

interesting questions that may entertain us while we wait for the more important answers that ought to be sought. The more important answers are, perhaps, those that respond to the questions concerning what we are doing.

### III.

The indication that there is more going on in the text than we think is a challenge to use our imagination. Use of the imagination is a requirement that we go beyond the stated or supposed facts. Asking what is going on in the text is like asking for a decision concerning the significance of passages. Stating the significance of an event is to approach beliefs that, of course, do not necessarily rely on historical facts. Both facts and beliefs are encompassed by another factor. Stories, whether consciously designed contemporary fiction or folklore, affect both history and belief. Just as there are different significations for different events, so there are, legitimately, different stories that may be told. In telling of tales, there are no hostile clashes or competition. Heroes and tricksters abound. Of course, to tell another culture that you are going to treat its "hero" as a "story" is likely to draw scorn. Let us say, then, that everything is story. Everything told affects both history and belief. Nor is it the case that the best we can derive is a good story. It is the case that a good story is the best there is.

Let us do midrash. Let us approach the other not as a hostile entity from which we must suffer or whom we must eliminate. Let us approach each other as a tale that may interest us but toward which we must ultimately put our own signification if we are to achieve understanding. Indeed, once we propose to do this, to use imagination rather than rhetoric, to speak tales rather than curses, the world becomes not so sufferable, not so hostile. And, in the process we become heroic!

William Blake, perhaps not the greatest commentator on Christian thought, said that Jesus created "not one Moral Virtue that Plato and Cicero did not inculcate before him."<sup>(4)</sup> The everlasting gospel, according to Blake, is "forgiveness of sins alone."<sup>(5)</sup> Yet, even forgiveness, he said, was constituted by the Jews. Blake then presented several contradictions between Jesus' words and deeds. For example, the same person who said "obey your parents" asked his mother "what have I to do with thee?" Blake compared differing versions or visions of Jesus. One image had "a great hook nose" and another "a snub nose like to mine." One was a "friend of All Mankind." The other "spoke in parables to the blind."<sup>(6)</sup>

One may object that the duality of presentation derives neither a Christian nor a Judaic Jesus but a Nietzschean Christ. In such an instance, the distinction between the christological and the historical Jesus has become unimportant. What is important is contrasting sayings and deeds in order to pick and choose what one will or will not follow. One may object that the finding of contradictions is both easy and nonexplanatory. Nevertheless, even contemporary theologians point up contradictions. Pierre Talec noted, "He who said 'Who ever drinks of this water will never thirst again' also cried, 'I am thirsty.'"<sup>(7)</sup> Thought thrives on contradictions. If there were no contradictions, there would be little to think about. Gossip is nothing but the ploy of division: us against them/him/her. Philosophy is frequently the argument for this, against that.

Surely Talec's assertion indicates only a distinction between physical thirst and metaphoric thirst. If so, there may be more to quenching than simply drinking liquid. Again, there is a "more going on" that ought to be investigated. Perhaps the invention of contradictions ought be praised as a means for us to have something "more" to talk about than what is traditionally regarded as acceptable speech.

Consider the stories of two teachers. Jesus taught "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and, if the story is to be believed as a true report, Jesus was rejected with scorn and derision. Elisha ben Abuyah, on the other hand, at some point ceased considering himself a son of Israel,

became a lost sheep himself, and was treated with derision and scorn but was not totally rejected. Here is a severe contradiction: a good teacher rejected while a pure heretic accepted in some sense.

The stories in rabbinic literature concerning Elisha are devastating. The Jerusalem Talmud states that Elisha slew a scholar, enticed the young from studying Torah, and informed against Jews during the Hadrianic persecution (Hagigah II:1; 15a). Elisha penetrated the innermost secret recesses of religion and "cut the shoots," that is, perverted the teachings and traditions. We are told that Greek songs did not cease from his mouth and, when Elisha rose to leave the schoolhouse, many heretical books fell from his lap (J.T., Hag. 15b).

Nevertheless, Elisha is remembered in rabbinic literature for teaching Rabbi Meir, one of the most respected sages of Israel. Elisha is also quoted in several instances himself, before becoming an apostate, as an authority. Among other teachings, Elisha is named as the authority who determined the time of mourning in two different instances: the case where a father dies and the son is not informed for three years, and the case where a son dies in the diaspora (Mo'ed Katan 20a). Consider what these situations tell us about the times: fathers dying, sons dying; contact between family members severed, communications made impossible; exile and existence taking their toll on the people; sages going insane, sages becoming heretic!<sup>(8)</sup> These were perilous times. Sin, one may imagine, was rampant; the cajoling of human beings into the nets of error was abundant. Life was estranged, in danger, and of little worth.

God, as worshipped by Christianity, is determined to be a God who "justifies the godless" (Rom. 4:5) by calling sinners to join the community. God is a being "who overrides religious and racial barriers to meet human beings at the place of their need."<sup>(9)</sup> When Rabbi Meir followed the heretic Aher, who was riding a horse on the Sabbath, in order to hear his legitimate teachings, the image of God we humans forge for ourselves went even beyond the requirement that the sinner join the community. Aher was living separate from the community. Nevertheless, Meir was determined to argue the case of Elisha with the result that, after Meir died and argued with God, the grave of Aher emitted smoke. This smoke indicated that Elisha had been forgiven. Surely Meir's concern for Elisha was a messianic moment. Surely the retention of Elisha's legitimate teachings in the rabbinic literature constitutes messianic instances.

What do we learn from the sages' treatment of Elisha? We learn, it seems, that wisdom and halakah are to be derived from anyone who possesses insight, whatever their life-situations or personal circumstance. Yet, this is manifestly not the case with Jesus. If we start with the idea that the Jews rejected Jesus with scorn and derision, there is a contradiction between the words of the sages concerning Jesus (that he was an apostate, a demon, a fool) and their actions (accepting wisdom from every source, regarding the apostate as in a messianic moment rather than pure rejection). The rejection of Jesus, then, is one more instance of Pharisaic hypocrisy. They say one thing and do another. They hold fast to a heretic who did things much worse than Jesus, yet reject the latter without hesitation. The sages, one might believe, are the fools. They rejected their Christ, the Son of God, very God of the universe.

Yet, if we start from a much simpler hypothesis - that the rabbis did not know Jesus, were largely unaware of his activities, and did not come to hear or understand the stories concerning Jesus until relatively late - then a different, more realistic story results. The evidence for early knowledge of Jesus is very thin. There seems to have been a rabbinic development of the image of Jesus that corresponds to the Christian development through texts. One may say that the more "positive/adulatory" the Christian theologians spoke about Jesus the more "negative" the rabbis spoke. The earliest discernable Jewish utterances about Jesus spoke of him as an ignoble student who was given a limited excommunication (Sotah 47a). At some later period Jesus was regarded as a heretic. The latest rabbinic utterance speaks not about Jesus at all but about the theologian's image of him: "If a man say to thee: 'I am God,' he is a liar. If he says: 'I am the Son of Man,' in the

end people will laugh at him. If he says: 'I will ascend to heaven,' he saith it, but he shall not perform it."[\(10\)](#)

If the suggestion of a late recognition of Jesus is cogent, when the rabbis began truly to assess statements made by or about Jesus - which never occurred in an adequate manner - he could no longer be regarded as an ignoble student or a heretic or simply a fool. People were claiming he was God. Such a claim would have caused the rabbis to forego any detailed consideration of Jesus. Indeed, the rabbis reported Rabbi Eliezer's having heard a halakic statement from one of the disciples of Jesus (Abodah Zerah 16b-17a), which was preserved as perhaps the only legal decision of Jesus remembered by anyone. Beyond that, Jesus had become worse than a heretic: He had become an alien god. Such things were never discussed. Not even if Aher had perverted school children with such myths would these have been presented in the literature.

#### IV.

The story of Jesus, like all stories, requires not ignorance but interpretation. Interpretations, as the retention and projection of goodly teachings, are instances of a messianic moment. One story is elaborated and calls forth another story. Particular stories are not worrisome when they present conflicting truths. A Jew may indeed contribute to these additional stories, even about Jesus. The Jewish versions, however, will be radically dissimilar from the Christian interpretations and may even be regarded as blasphemous.

The Gospels themselves indicate Jews of various religious affiliations who attempted to make sense of Jesus. Fisherfolk and peasants flocked to him. Sages are portrayed as debating with him. Mysterious persons, like Joseph of Arimathea, are shown to have a mysterious relationship with him. Herod questioned him. Gamaliel defended the sect. Sadducees excommunicated him. We need regard none of these instances as universally true. Each attempts to communicate something "more" about what was going on than an extremely tightly reasoned and well-researched journalistic account may have provided. On the other hand, Jesus was arrested, tried, convicted, and executed by a source that did not concern itself with religious understanding. We may regard some of the stories told by and about Jesus as not factual statements. Nevertheless, stories (fiction) were, and are, a means of approaching truth.

A Jew may eventually regard Jesus as a metaphor for God. Søren Kierkegaard suggested that Jesus represented the way we humans would have treated God if God lived on earth.[\(11\)](#) Human beings would, until things changed for the good, ignore, betray, arrest, and crucify God. A Yiddish proverb says, "If God lived on earth, we would break His windows."

Imagine God as our neighbor. We do not have to stretch our imagination. Our treatment of the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the orphaned, and the sick designs our treatment of God. A Christian may say that Jesus made himself resemble all the above "types." Our attitude toward Jesus, then - like our attitude toward any human being, toward other beings, toward trees and rivers that are polluted on a routine basis, toward everything in life - indicates our attitude toward God.

To prevent the stories that we may eventually tell with regard to Jesus or trees or polluted rivers from offending, we may perhaps agree at the beginning that our stories have but one goal: to excavate, define, and strengthen our relationship with God. If so, strength may even proceed through an initial blasphemy. We ought not fear what sounds blasphemous if our goal is to strengthen our relationship with God. Excavation, definition, and strength proceed through stories we tell ourselves and one another. Nevertheless, our stories ought to do so by feeding, clothing, and sheltering both ourselves and the other: the depraved, the soiled, the hungry, the pained. Our stories ought to inspire us to take care of one another, physically, psychologically, spiritually, and

metaphorically. If so, our stories will not be lies but Aaronic truths; that is, tales told to search the hidden recesses of the good life.

There would then be no need to seek heroes. We would speak a new heroics into being.

**Notes:**

[1](#) Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology* (Atlanta, GA John Knox Press 1981), p. 206.

[2](#) Ibid.

[3](#) Karl Rahner, "The Historical Jesus as a Dogmatic Problem, in Geoffrey B. Kelley, ed., *Rarl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 217.

[4](#) William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 848.

[5](#) Ibid.

[6](#) Ibid., p. 851.

[7](#) PierreTalec, *Jesus and the Hunger for Things Unknown*, tr. Joachim Neugroschel (NewYork: Seabury Press, 1982), p. 2.

[8](#) See a fuller treatment of these and the following issues in my "Elisha ben Abuyah In Our Midst," *Midstream*, Vol. XXXXII, No. 2 (Feb./Mar. 1996).

[9](#) Martin, *Reconciliation*, p. 212.

[10](#) Cited in Hugh J. Schonfield, *According to the Hebrews: A New Translation of the Jewish Life of Jesus (the Toldoth Jeshu)*, with an inquiry into the Nature of the Sources and Special Relationship to the Lost Gospel according to the Hebrews (London: Duckworth, 1937), p. 151.

[11](#) Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 286.



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