Rabbi Meir was seated in the house of study in Tiberias on Shabbat, expounding, while his teacher Elisha was passing through the marketplace astride his horse. People came by and told Rabbi Meir: Look, your teacher Elisha is here riding through the marketplace. Rabbi Meir interrupted his expounding and went out to him.

Elisha asked: What verse have you been expounding today? Rabbi Meir: “So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning” (Job 42:12). Elisha: What did you say about it? Rabbi Meir: “The Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before” (Job 42:10) -- God doubled his possessions.

Elisha: Alas for those who are gone and are no more -- your teacher Akiva would not have spoken thus. He would have construed these words: “The Lord blessed the latter end of Job "because of the beginning" -- because of the observance of precepts and good deeds that had been Job's at the beginning.

Elisha: What other verse did you expound? Rabbi Meir: “Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof” (Kohellet 7:8). Elisha: What did you say about it? Rabbi Meir: You have a man who acquired merchandise in his youth and sustained a loss, but in his old age makes a profit from it. Or, you have a man who learned Torah in his youth and forgot it, but it comes back to him in his old age.

Elisha: Alas for those who are gone and are no more -- your teacher Akiva would not have spoken thus. He would have construed it “Good is the end of a thing from the beginning” -- when it is good from its beginning.
So it happened with me. Abuyah, my father, was one of the notables of Jerusalem. When he was arranging for my circumcision, he invited all the notables of Jerusalem, among them Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua.

After they had eaten and drunk, they began to clap their hands and dance. Some of the notables sang songs, and others composed alphabetical acrostics. Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Yehoshua: These are occupied with what interests us: shall we not occupy ourselves with what interests us?

They began to speak words of Torah, and from the Torah to the Prophets, and from the Prophets to the Writings. And fire came down from heaven and surrounded them. At that point Abuyah said to them: My masters, have you come to set my house afire over me?

They replied: God forbid! We were merely sitting and stringing words of Torah, then from the Torah we went on to the Prophets, and from the Prophets to the Writings. The words were as joyful as when they were given at Sinai. For when originally given at Sinai, they were given in the midst of fire, as is said: “The mountain burned with fire unto the heart of heaven” (Devarim 4:11).

Elisha: What other verse did you expound? Rabbi Meir: “Gold and glass cannot equal it; neither shall the exchange thereof be vessels of fine gold” (Job 28:17). Elisha: What did you say about it? Rabbi Meir: These are the words of Torah – they are as difficult to acquire as vessels of gold and are as readily destroyed as vessels of glass.

Elisha: By God, even as readily as earthenware vessels. But your teacher Akiva would not have spoken thus. He would have said: “As vessels of gold and even vessels of glass can be repaired if broken, so can a disciple of the wise recover his learning if it has disintegrated.”

Rabbi Meir: So you, too, must come back. Elisha: I cannot. Because I have heard the divine voice reverberating: “Return, O backsliding children” (Jeremiah 3:14), except for Elisha ben Abuyah, who knew my strength and yet rebelled against Me.
When Rabbi Meir and Elisha had walked a long while, Elisha on his horse on Shabbat and Rabbi Meir after him, hanging on to his teacher's every word, Aher said to him: Meir, turn back, for I have just measured by the paces of my horse that the Shabbat limit extends only thus far.

He replied: You, too, go back! Aher answered: Have I not just told you that I have already heard from behind the heavenly curtain, “Return, O backsliding children – except Aher”? Nevertheless, Rabbi Meir prevailed upon him and took him into a schoolhouse, where Aher said to a child: Recite for me your verse. The child answered, “There is no peace, says the Lord, unto the wicked” (Isaiah 48:22).

Rabbi Meir took him to another schoolhouse, where Aher said to a child: Recite for me your verse. The child answered, “For though you wash yourself with nitre, and use much soap, yet your iniquity is marked before Me, and you, despoiled one, what can you do that you wear crimson, that you adorn yourself again Aher said to a child: Recite for me your verse. The child answered, “There is no peace, says the Lord, unto the wicked” (Jeremiah 4:30).

Rabbi Meir took him to yet another schoolhouse, where again Aher said to a child: Recite for me your verse. The child answered, “And you, despoiled one, what can you do that you wear crimson, that you adorn yourself with golden ornaments, that you enlarge your eye with paint? In vain do you make yourself fair... They seek your life” (Jeremiah 4:30).

And thus Rabbi Meir took Aher to thirteen schools, one after the other, where in like vein all the children quoted verses boding evil. When Aher said to the last child: Recite for me your verse, he answered, “But unto the wicked God says: For what reason do you recount My statutes?” (Tehillim 50:16). That child had a speech defect, so it sounded as though he answered, *But to Elisha God said...* At that, Elisha said: Had I a knife in my hand, I would have cut him to pieces.

It is said of him, of Aher, that Greek song did not cease from his mouth and whenever he rose to leave the house of study, many heretical books would fall out of his lap.

It is also said of him, of Aher, that when he entered a meeting place of scholars and saw youngsters with scrolls in front of them, he would say: Why do these sit here and occupy themselves in this manner? This one's craft should be that of a builder. That one's, that of a carpenter. That one's, that of a painter. And that other one's, that of a tailor. When the youngsters heard such talk, they left their scrolls and went away.
What did Aher see that made him go wrong? It is said that once, while sitting in the valley of Gennaser, he saw a man climb to the top of a palm tree on Shabbat, take the mother bird with the young, and descend in safety. At the end of Shabbat, he saw another man climb to the top of the same palm tree, take the young but let the mother bird go free. As he descended, a snake bit him and he died.

Elisha exclaimed: It is written, “Let the mother go and take only the young, that you may fare well and have a long life” (Devarim 22:7). Where is the well-being of this man and where is the prolonging of his life?

Some say that Elisha became a heretic when he saw a pig dragging along in its mouth the tongue of the famous sage Rabbi Yehudah. He said then: This is the tongue from which pearls of purest ray used to come forth all his days. Some say that Elisha became a heretic when he saw a pig dragging along in its mouth the tongue of the famous sage Rabbi Yehudah. He said then: This is the tongue from which pearls of purest ray used to come forth all his days.

In that instant, Elisha ben Abuyah began to weep, and then he died. Rabbi Meir rejoiced, saying: My master, it is written, “Let the mother go and take only the young, that you may fare well and have a long life” (Devarim 22:7). Where is the well-being of this man and where is the prolonging of his life?

Immediately, he resolved to commit sin. He went out and, seeing a prostitute, beckoned to her. She asked: Are you not Elisha ben Abuyah? It was Shabbat and he pulled a radish out of a furrow and gave it to her. So she said: He is clearly another.

Some time later, Elisha ben Abuyah fell ill, and Rabbi Meir was told: Your master is ill. He went to visit him and said: Repent! Elisha asked: Having gone so far, will I be accepted? Rabbi Meir replied: Is it not written, “You allow a person to return, up to their being crushed” (Tehillim 90:3), up to the time that life is being crushed out of them?

In that instant, Elisha ben Abuyah began to weep, and then he died. Rabbi Meir rejoiced, saying: My master, it would appear, departed in a state of repentance.

However, after he was buried, fire came forth from heaven to burn his grave. They went and told Rabbi Meir: The grave of your master is on fire! Rabbi Meir went out, spread his cloak over the grave, and said to him: “Stay this night” (Ruth 3:13) -- in this world which is wholly night -- “and it shall be in the morning” (Ruth 3:13) -- the world-to-come, all of which is morning -- “if the One who is good will redeem you” (Ruth 3:13) -- that is, the Holy One, who is good, of whom it is said, “The Lord is good to all and God's mercies are on all God's works” (Tehillim 145:9). But if God is not willing to redeem you, then I, Meir, will redeem you. “As the Lord lives, lie down until morning” (Ruth 3:13). The fire was then extinguished.