

As a Driven Leaf Study Guide

As a Driven Leaf by Milton Steinberg

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Plot Summary

As a Driven Leaf derives its title from the Biblical passage in Job: "Wherefore hidest Though Thy face...Wilt Thou harass a driven leaf?" It is an historical fiction about Elisha ben Abuyah, a Rabbi who lived in the time soon after Christ, who was a member of the Sanhedrin until his ex-communication, and lived most of his life in Antioch, Syria. It is the story of a man who questions his faith and tries to regain it through a search of literature, history, science and math over his lifetime of studies, only to realize too late that his search for truth without faith is an empty quest.

The novel begins with Elisha's birth in Palestine, to a mother who dies giving him life, and a father who is known in the Jewish community as a Greek sympathizer. Elisha lives with his father and his education includes Greek culture, literature and science until his father dies. At ten, Elisha is a wealthy orphan given into the care of his Uncle Amman. Amman points Elisha in the strict traditional way of the Jewish faith, and Elisha becomes a rabbi and a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest council of wisdom in Palestine. Elisha begins questioning his faith and his life and finally leaves his wife, the Sanhedrin, and Palestine to seek answers to his burning questions about faith and science.

Elisha moves to Antioch to live with his best friend Pappas. There he begins what will be his lifelong search for a scientific methodology to explain faith and truth. He meets a Roman soldier's concubine, Manta, and falls deeply in love with her. Prevented from having a normal life with Manta and still troubled by his quest for truth, Elisha buries himself in books and studies, surrounding himself with Greek ways and friends, and eventually coming to admire the Romans for their governmental structures.

When war breaks out between the Jews and Romans, Elisha stays true to his vow to a dying Manta and avoids execution by assisting the Romans to fight the Jews. When the war ends, he returns to his studies and finally faces the fact he may have been chasing dreams his entire life. He dies a broken, disillusioned man with no family, only a few dear friends left, penniless and disgraced in his homeland.



Prologue, Part One, Chapters I - IV

Prologue, Part One, Chapters I - IV Summary

The seventy sages of the Sanhedrin are in session, discussing the law and the interpretation of the Traditions. The Patriarch has raised a question that has been discussed many times by the sages, with no resolution. The question refers to whether or not a man should use other resources than what the Jews have been given to read or study, specifically, Greek books and letters. One rabbi rises to give an opinion that pagans offer a wisdom that fails. After he speaks, the Patriarch decides it is time for evening prayers, and once again, no decision is reached on this important and controversial subject.

Elisha, son of Abuyah and Elisheba, is born. The child's mother dies soon after childbirth, and the father is devastated. The family home is full of visitors and rabbis who have come for the sacred rite of circumcision of the baby boy. Included in the crowd are two of the most famous sages, Eliezer and Joshua. Elisha's uncle, Amram, has taken over the ceremony at the absence of Abuyah. There are murmurings in the crowd over Abuyah, as he is known to have studied Greek and Roman works and is considered something of a heretic. When Abuyah does arrive for the ceremony, he behaves irreverently and shocks everyone. The two sages wonder if this means problems for the son, Elisha.

It is ten years later, and Elisha is receiving instruction from a Greek scholar, Nicholas. Nicholas falls asleep and Elisha takes this opportunity to slip away and see his friend Pappas. The two boys are headed to watch a cow give birth when Theo, a young girl who lives nearby calls to them to be allowed to join. Pappas teases Theo about her Greek name and tells Elisha he has overheard that Theo is to be Elisha's wife. The boys encounter an encampment of Roman soldiers on their way from Damascus to Philadelphia Ammon. Two of the soldiers speak to the boys, teasing them about being Jews and saying they should have been eliminated when the Temple was destroyed. Elisha's steward, Tobias, is furious with the boys for speaking to the Romans because the Romans were the ones who murdered so many Jews and destroyed the Temple. Tobias sends Pappas home and as Elisha is going back to Nicholas, he overhears his father and his Uncle Amram discussing Elisha and his future. Elisha hears his father say he does not believe in the miracles of the parting of the Red Sea and refuses to have his son taught historical, incredible myths. Caught eavesdropping by his tutor Nicholas, Elisha resumes his studies.

Abuyah is dying, and Elisha is taken to his side. His father's last words are a wish that Elisha will be wholehearted, not torn in two, but Elisha does not understand. When Abuyah dies, Amram takes over the house and Elisha's life, sending Nicholas away and burning all books and documents that are not Jewish. Elisha begins a three-year period of Amram's zealous instruction and becomes thoroughly Jewish in practice and



appearance, yet not in thought. Elisha is neither excited about the faith nor dissenting of it.

Amram takes Elisha to the barren and simple home of Rabbi Joshua to begin in earnest his training to become a rabbi and sage. Elisha is shocked by the simple living conditions and this unattractive man, and Rabbi Joshua encourages him to admit it within an hour of his arrival. Amram is shocked, but Joshua wins the boy's confidence by proposing a trial period for them both. The two, Joshua and Elisha begin the next day to establish routines of learning, prayer, and caring for their home. Elisha begins a life of sage apprentice, and when the stipulated trial period is over, he enthusiastically chooses to stay with Joshua.

Prologue, Part One, Chapters I - IV Analysis

The author sets before the reader a paradox: sages are considered to be the wisest of men, but if they limit themselves to only one path of education, are they still wise? If they include the teachings of pagans, can they retain the purity of thought that their elevated positions require so they can deliver God's true law to his people? This question will be the basis of Elisha's anguish in his life.

Abuyah consorts with pagan philosophers and reads Greek books, and although this is greatly frowned upon, it is still not forbidden to do so in this society. Abuja's grief over losing his wife is considered no excuse to deviate from the traditions of the Jewish people, but it is obvious Abuyah has lost his faith and is constantly questioning its purpose in his life.

Elisha is made aware of the difference between himself and the other Jewish boys, who are restricted to studying Jewish texts only. He hears his father's very strong opinions about history and tradition, and although he does not yet have an opinion about these things, those of his father and his tutor are impressed upon him far more than those of his Uncle Amram. In Elisha's question to Nicholas concerning miracles, the reader can see the seeds of doubt beginning to form in the young man's mind.

Forced to study only Jewish material after his father's death, the young confused Elisha complies with all demands, but does not commit his heart one way or the other. He remembers and observes, but does nothing.

Amram is an unrelenting zealot in the Jewish tradition, but even he realizes his efforts are wasted on Elisha because the boy does not love him. Amram wisely turns him over to another more compassionate man who can turn Elisha's heart down the desired path. With Joshua, Elisha is finally able to turn from his father's teachings and those of Nicholas and the Greeks, to fully learn the ways of the Jews.



Part One, Chapters V-IX

Part One, Chapters V-IX Summary

It is four years after Elisha came to live with Joshua, and they are at the Sanhedrin for the first time. Allowed to sit on a wall near the proceedings, Elisha is entranced by the discussions of law and tradition and matches his own thoughts with those of the answers of the sages. After some time though, his attention wanders, and he drifts to sleep, accidentally bumping the man next to him. In this fashion he meets Akiba, an older man who is also a student. The two men become fast friends. As the Sanhedrin is breaking up, Joshua is walking with one of the other rabbis and Elisha joins them. The other rabbi remembers Elisha's father and is amazed that the man who loved Greeks so much could have a son who is studying to be a rabbi. The next day the Sanhedrin is not open to visitors, so Elisha roams the area, feeling as though he is an outsider. When Joshua rejoins him, he tells Elisha that there are rebels among the Jews and the Sanhedrin is sending a delegation to Rome asking to rebuild their temple. At a dinner that night, Elisha meets a confusing and angry man named Shraga, who is a rebellious and almost insane fighter for the Jews. Akiba moves Elisha to his table, where he meets two other disciples, Simeon ben Azzai and Simeon ben Zoma.

Elisha is an apprentice to Joshua for many years and returns home only for major festivals. Amram tells him he will inherit the family villa eventually so uses these visits to instruct Elisha in the ways of business and estate management. When Elisha is 20, he returns home to find he has been betrothed to Deborah and not Theo. Amram has chosen Deborah because Theo's family is part Greek and Amram is worried that might influence Elisha from the path to being a great sage. Elisha is at first unhappy but accepts his Uncle's plan. Elisha arranges that the marriage not take place for several years.

Deborah and Elisha are married when he is 23. After the week-long festivities, Elisha is exhausted and very disappointed in Deborah as a wife. Pappas finds him in the garden, alone with his thoughts. Pappas tells Elisha he is moving to Antioch, and that Elisha will always be welcome to join him. Elisha's time with Joshua is over; Amram dies soon after the wedding, and Pappas is gone to another country. As Deborah and Elisha continue their lives together, he is dismayed to find that she has no sense of humor, no sense of play, and she is constantly upset with the servants for trivial matters.

In the second year of their marriage, Deborah becomes pregnant twice and loses both babies. To console her, Elisha offers to take her to a feast and they are to stay at Akiba's house. Deborah tells Elisha he should choose friends who are wealthy like he is. Elisha is angry at her attitude, knowing that Akiba and the two Simeons are dear friends and wise sages. At the feast Deborah's behavior and remarks make it very clear that she regards wealth more valuable than friendship, and Elisha is deeply embarrassed.



Elisha is notified that he is now a candidate for ordination. When he returns home, Deborah insists that the servants all call him Rabbi, although he has not yet attained that rank. She is concerned that someone like Shraga might prevent his ascension, and encourages Elisha to curry the man's favor in order to ensure his ordination. Elisha replies coldly that he would never stoop so low. Deborah then begins telling Elisha she wants to rid the house of all the older servants because they are no longer useful. He refuses to reprimand any of them, and she is furious. Pappas is home from Antioch and comes by to see Elisha; the two men discuss theology and law, and the differences between Jews, Greeks and Romans. Pappas has brought a Greek book as a gift, and Elisha is pleased. Deborah later tells Elisha Pappas is not good company for him, and he should not be reading Greek books.

Part One, Chapters V-IX Analysis

The bond between Joshua and Elisha is shown to be strong and full of mutual respect. Elisha meets several men who will be important in his life: Akiba, Shraga, Simeon ben Azzai and Simeon ben Zoma. Even though Elisha is surrounded by devoted Jews and establishing strong friendships with other disciples, the thoughts of Rabbi Johanan of Abuyah's strong sympathies for the Greek remind the reader of Elisha's heritage. More foreshadowing comes in the form of the nasty character Shraga and the talk at Sanhedrin about rebels.

Amram is reluctant to refrain from meddling in his nephew's affairs and continues to remove all forms of Greek influence from his life. Elisha's continuing doubts of the correctness of his uncle's demands is displayed in the delay of the marriage, and Elisha's confusion about what is right, his uncle's way or his father's way. It is obvious that Elisha still desires contact with something besides the Jewish way of life.

As one by one the people in Elisha's life go away, either by death or because his marriage requires him to live with her, Deborah is the center of Elisha's life. He finds no joy with her, and the dream he had of a wonderful emotional and physical bonding with a woman is gone. The reader sees that Elisha has great expectations of this life and so far has not been satisfied.

Elisha was never in love with Deborah, but he could have been happy with her if her personality were not so different from his. He values friendship and wisdom above all, and she values only social standing and wealth. Another dream dies.

Elisha is further dismayed and made resentful of his wife's behavior, and when Pappas brings news of his life in Syria he is defensive of his friendship with someone so far from the Jewish standards. There is foreshadowing here of temptations and interruptions to Elisha's path.



Part One, Chapters X-XV

Part One, Chapters X-XV Summary

Thirteen years after sitting as an observer and Joshua's apprentice at Sanhedrin, Elisha is being ordained as a Rabbi. He has traveled all of Judea and Galilee, studying, attending academies, sitting with the masters. Joshua his old instructor is there and is immensely proud of Elisha. Elisha begins his life as a Rabbi by sitting as a judge in Usha. Meir, a younger student, invites Elisha to stay with him and his wife, but Elisha decides instead to share the Sabbath with them.

Elisha has Sabbath with Meir and his wife Beruriah and is completely taken with the young couple and their two children, Saul and Samuel. In his subsequent visits to Usha, he stays with Meir and Beruriah and makes many trips there. At first he brought Deborah, but she felt uncomfortable with people who were not wealthy, so Elisha stopped bringing her. Elisha feels Beruriah is the perfect woman and wishes his marriage had been like that of hers and Meir.

Elisha is sent to Tiberius as a sage to sit in court over a controversial issue. He is dismayed to find that Shraga is one of the other sages on the case. Shraga recommends giving in to the merchant in order to prevent him from going to a Roman court for his satisfaction, but Elisha and the other judge refuse to comply. Shraga's hatred of Elisha is evident. The merchant takes his case to the Roman court and the Jewish court decision was overturned. The merchant's business suffered and he went bankrupt and was ostracized from the land.

Palestine is visited by the plague, and the population is terrified. Elisha is in Usha, with Meir and Beruriah, and the twin boys are ill. The boys die of the plague. Elisha stays with Meir and Beruriah throughout the week of mourning and then travels to attend the Sanhedrin. Along the way, he wonders about the mercy of a God who would cause such anguish by taking the boys from the earth. He is unable to concentrate on the proceedings, as he goes over the Jewish tradition and sayings trying to find some justification for these deaths. This is the moment that Rabbi Eliezer chooses to demand that the Sanhedrin ban their people from reading anything pagan. Rabbi Joshua rises to counter by saying that banning people from knowledge and truth, wherever they may find it, is sacrilege. Elisha remembers the teachings of his old instructor, Nicholas. Elisha begins to have serious misgivings about the path he has chosen to attain wisdom. Eliezer's proposal is voted down. On his next journey, Elisha stops in a small town to watch a magician and it leads him to wonder about the miracles he has been taught as part of his religion. Were they miracles or a slight of hand?

The Emperor Trajan is in Caesarea holding audiences for petitioners. The delegation from the Jewish Court is before him, and he is bored. He singles out Joshua, remembering the man for his extraordinary ugliness and asks him what they want. Joshua asks if they can rebuild their temple, and Trajan, in a moment of boredom, says



go ahead. Elisha is in the delegation and is overwhelmed by the mightiness of the pagan army and their ways. He continues to question his teachings, and when he cannot bear keeping these thoughts to himself anymore, he tells Deborah who is aghast. Elisha sees that he needs to share these thoughts with someone else, and sets a meeting with Akiba, Simeon of Azzai and Simeon ben Zoma.

Part One, Chapters X-XV Analysis

Chapter 10 recites the ceremony and sacredness of Jewish tradition as Elisha assumes the rank of Rabbi and sage of Sanhedrin, a great honor. His friends surround him and his career begins well. Elisha's dream and that of Amram and Joshua is realized, and Elisha seems happy.

Through his association with Meir and Beruriah, Elisha sees what a true marriage should be like, and it causes him even more sadness as he looks at his own marriage with Deborah.

There is a deepening rift between Elisha and Shraga, and Shraga's warnings about a coming war with the Romans is a foreshadowing. Elisha finds that not all is clear when meting out the law of the Jewish tradition because there are other factors, such as the Roman Empire to be considered.

The plague turned the population's thoughts away from the controversy at Tiberius and reminds Elisha how fragile life is when Meir's sons die. Elisha knows the Jewish stories and traditions very well, enough to take them apart and analyze them. Fresh with grief over the boys' deaths, he is seeing these stories in a different light, which is the beginnings of doubt.

The Roman empire is a huge pagan machine, and the Jewish people are just a tiny part of the land, subject to the whims of insane emperors and a civilization at the brink of losing its greatness. Where the Jewish delegation planned and prepared and spoke solemnly and logically, their petition was answered favorably not because of their preparations, but because the Emperor was amused by seeing ugly Joshua again. Elisha takes his concerns to the next level by expressing them to Deborah, then planning to share these thoughts with his best friends.



Part One, Chapters XVI - XIX

Part One, Chapters XVI - XIX Summary

The four friends, Elisha, Akiba and the two Simeons, meet, and Elisha presents his idea. Without telling them of his doubts of their religion, he tells them they should begin a study of relevant Greek literature in order to counter any questions that may come up when devout Jews ask the sages for an opinion regarding the validity of the work. Akiba expands on Elisha's ideas and assists him in convincing the two Simeons that the work is important. When he leaves them, he visits Meir and Beruriah, then goes to the pagan part of Caesarea to find a bookseller. To his delight, he is directed to the shop owned by his old tutor, Nicholaus, and the two men renew their friendship. Nicholaus chooses several books and scrolls that will assist Elisha in his studies. Elisha begins the study and the world opens for him. By accident one day, he drops a Greek scroll in his Jewish academy class and shocks everyone.

Palestine is overjoyed about Trajan's edict that the Temple may be rebuilt, and money pours in from the Jewish people. In the two years since Elisha's friends had begun their Greek studies, they met frequently, but the friends were becoming troubled by Elisha's continuing questions and doubt. They no longer enjoyed meeting with him. Elisha sees this but is unable to stop the questions within him. The Sanhedrin decides to go to the Temple Mount, and the old men have a difficult time with the journey. Once there, Elisha surveys the desolation and tells Joshua he does not think the rebuilding will ever happen.

Akiba, Simeon ben Azzai and Simeon ben Zoma are thinking of Elisha and the studies they agreed to do for him. Each has been severely affected by the knowledge they have gained, and each is handling this infusion of pagan beliefs and stories in a different way. Akiba is processing the information well, but the two Simeons are going insane. Elisha is realizing his two years of study, with the assistance of his friends, have not supplied the answers he so desperately needs. He decides to seek out Christians and Gnostics, and whoever else might have the answers.

Men are working on Temple Mount following the decree that it be rebuilt. A Roman cavalry arrives and the commander gives the building supervisor a new decree that stops the work and sends all the Jews home. The workers, numbering over 500, decide to stay and fight, but the supervisor convinces them to turn this matter over to the Sanhedrin, who will fix everything. Elisha is in Usha, staying at the home of Meir and Beruriah. Meir is called away, and Elisha and Beruriah are left alone together. Elisha tells her he can no longer accept their hospitality because he has fallen in love with her. Just then, a rider comes into town with the news that work on the temple has stopped and the Romans have banned Jews from the site.



Part One, Chapters XVI - XIX Analysis

Elisha is moving forward in his quest to find the truth and manipulates his best friends into helping him under the guise of preparing themselves for questions from students regarding the Greek literature. His renewal of friendship with Nicholaus provides him with a cover to get the books he needs, but it is obvious his studies will not go unnoticed by the Jewish population.

The obsession with truth through whatever means, even the dissolution of his friendships, has begun with Elisha. He cannot stop wondering if the Jewish traditions are all just myths and the real truth lies with science, math or philosophy. The foreshadowing here of his diminishing concern about his friendships and the remarks he makes at Temple Mount are indicative of the growing problem for Elisha.

Elisha's questions begin to have their sacrifices, as his friends have tortured thoughts, and he is unable to accept his life without the truth he needs.

Trajan's edict is overturned, showing how shallow the promises of Rome are to the Jewish people. Elisha's feelings for Beruriah are exposed, and he is planning to tell his friends their studies are finished. He is closing doors, removing himself from those closest to him.



Part One, Chapters XX-XVII

Part One, Chapters XX-XVII Summary

Elisha and his friends are at the home of Simeon ben Azzai, waiting for their host to appear so they can start their meeting. Simeon ben Azzai comes into the room and talks and chants and quotes scriptures and believes he is ready to meet God. He is completely insane and dies in their arms.

Elisha is at Nicholas' shop, telling him of the past events, speaking of his growing obsession with finding the truth. Nicholas tells him to repress these feelings, and when Elisha moans that he cannot, Nicholas tells him he will stand by him as a friend.

In Palestine, a large number of Jews have gathered to begin war against the Romans. A small delegation of the Sanhedrin sages are there, alarmed at the prospect of fighting a war. Julianus of Tarsus is the leader of the rebels, and the Rabbi Joshua stands up against him as Julianus encourages the Jews to fight. Rabbi Joshua speaks and convinces the multitudes to go home for now and await direction from the true leaders of Israel. War is averted at this moment, but the rebellion lives on.

Elisha is embarking on his new plan to visit the churches and speak with the Jews and Christians who believe differently than the traditional Jewish doctrine, in hopes they will provide him with answers. He meets with Justin, the leader of the Gentile Christians, and the two men discuss the methodology of religion. Elisha comes away no further enlightened than before. Upon returning to his rooms he is met by a delegation of the local Jews who want to know what he is doing. As he is trying to come up with a plausible excuse, Elisha is dismayed when Nicholas comes in, further damaging his reputation. Nicholas sees the problem and when the delegation leaves, he tries to convince Elisha to leave Israel as soon as possible. Elisha is not yet ready.

A few months later, Simeon ben Zoma goes mad and in his ravings, implicates Elisha as the one who created the disbelief in him. Meir goes directly to Elisha's house and tells him what has happened. Meir explains that it is not just Elisha's enemies who are talking about his questions, it is everyone. Elisha acknowledges to Meir that the Sanhedrin will probably indict him, but he cannot turn away from his need to know the outcome of his questions, his ideas and opinions. Deborah has eavesdropped and tries to renew her marriage with him, but Elisha is despondent and does not respond to her efforts. She realizes how estranged they have become.

The commander of the Roman empire in Palestine is meeting with a delegation of the Sanhedrin. The insurrection leaders have been caught, and he is telling the sages that they helped to stop a war. All the pleading and begging of the sages amounts to nothing as the commander does not change his orders. At the executions, Elisha and Akiba leave the crowd of observers and meet in a small garden nearby. Elisha says the Jews are finished, but Akiba does not share that belief. Elisha tells Akiba he is going to rid



himself of all knowledge and start again, setting up a basis of truth on which to build a faith. Akiba argues that there is a higher truth, that of faith, and faith is the foundation. Elisha is not convinced. Akiba takes his leave of him, but before departing, pleads with Elisha to turn back before everything is lost.

Elisha visits Meir and Beruriah, and while he and Meir are studying, Elisha is overcome with discontent that he does not have the proper educational background to study Greek literature and science well. He is reminded of the letter from Pappas, received only yesterday, entreating him to come to Antioch for a visit. Elisha is still considering this when he joins his fellow rabbis for routine duties. During a break in the duties, the men see a young boy climbing a tree for bird eggs, with his father below. The boy falls and dies from his injuries. Elisha watches this and memories of the Meir children wash over him. The despair and protest over the senseless waste builds up in him, and his faith dies at that moment. He tells the rabbis that there is no God.

Elisha has been commanded to appear before the Sanhedrin, but he has no intentions of defending himself. He avoids running into two rabbis by slipping into an academy where the teacher, unaware of his guest's present infamy, asks for a speech. Elisha, always true to himself, tells the students not to believe anything they are taught in the academy. Elisha returns to his home and begins finalizing his arrangements to leave forever. Deborah tries to change his mind, but they decide to part in divorce. He leaves his house with her screaming hatred at him.

Part One, Chapters XX-XVII Analysis

The first casualty of Elisha's search for truth is the mind of Simeon ben Azzai. The reader knows there will be many, many more. The depth of Elisha's obsession continues and is shown here by his realization that he may have to make many more sacrifices, including his own peace and comfort to attain his goals.

There is much unrest within the tribes of Israel, and the Jews are questioning the authority of their leaders, much as Elisha is questioning the authority of the scriptures. Elisha is pushing the boundaries of his restrictive society and is less able to explain his behavior to his fellow rabbis. He realizes he is headed for ex-communication but is not prepared yet to leave his life among the Jews. Elisha's questioning of the sacred scriptures is all out in the open now, and he knows he is headed towards a decision that will change his life. He has lost his dear friends, and the remaining Jewish rabbis are angry with him.

The eyes of the Roman empire are turning to Palestine because of the insurrection, but only as a giant might view an ant. Elisha is despairing from losing his friends; his marriage is in shambles; his reputation is rapidly falling; yet he cannot avoid thinking about his quest for truth and faith. The combination of yearning for more knowledge in order to complete his quest and the senseless death of an unknown boy presents Elisha with the defining moment of his life. He announces to all that there is no God, therefore ensuring he will be ex-communicated.

Elisha has made all his decisions and is abandoning the life he has always known, more sacrifices to the conundrum he has been living with all these years. He is willing to do anything to find the answers to his questions.



Part Two, Chapters I - VIII

Part Two, Chapters I - VIII Summary

Elisha arrives in Antioch and goes to the home of Pappas, where he is welcomed warmly. Immediately, Elisha is swept up into the lifestyle of Pappas, where there are parties and gatherings of Greeks. The first night, Elisha meets Manto, a beautiful woman who is mistress to Rufus. He also meets Antiphanes, a scholar. From the first night he is surrounded by scholars, philosophers, rhetoricians and jurists.

Three weeks later, two Roman officers come to the house of Pappas to deliver a document to Elisha—a summons to appear before the chief justice of the province. Elisha finds out that he has been called to return to Israel to stand trial. Pappas stands up for him, but Elisha is thrown in jail. Manto arranges for his release. Elisha meets with his lawyer and discovers that the extradition papers are not from the Sanhedrin, but from the rebels, including Shraga. Elisha will not press charges against the impostors, so Pappas agrees to go to Israel and extract a message of intent from the Sanhedrin concerning Elisha. Pappas is gone longer than expected, so the judges call Elisha to present his defense before them. Elisha goes to Manto for help once again. During their conversation, he tells her his life story and the reason he came to Antioch. Manto becomes involved in his quest, deciding he should be tutored by Antiphanes.

Elisha's court date is postponed, and he begins studying with Antiphanes. Pappas returns with news: the Sanhedrin does not want to extradite Elisha, and Joshua is dead. The ex-communication of Elisha was read at Sanhedrin; Joshua stood and introduced an interdict on Greek studies; the resolution passed, and Joshua went home and died. Elisha goes to court and presents the fraudulent and correct documents and is considerably impressed with the efficiency and professionalism of the Roman court system.

Elisha moves out of Pappas' apartments into a home of his own. He begins a routine of studying and his life revolves around books. Elisha's first course of study is basic Greek grammar, culture and history. Antiphanes and Elisha attend all the lectures and symposia offered in the city, including those by rival religions. Elisha is introduced to the seedy side of Antioch after accepting an invitation to dinner by one of the rhetoricians, and finds himself surrounded by men and women who are hedonistic and self centered.

Manto assists Elisha in choosing another slave for his house, and subsequently, Elisha sees the business of human trading. It disgusts him, and he is somewhat surprised at Manto's casual behavior. Elisha joins Pappas at the port of Antioch to tend to some business of Pappas, and a Roman ship arrives, bearing Rufus. Manto is there to greet him, and she and Pappas introduce Elisha to Rufus. Pappas and Elisha attend a spectacle at the local arena where men and lions kill each other. He feels the bloodlust and is ashamed.



Elisha goes to Manto's home who is alone. They consummate their love for one another. That night he must watch her with Rufus at a banquet, so the next morning he goes to her and asks her to marry him. Manto explains that this is impossible; she belongs to this world and could not ever go backwards in it. She loves him, but will not leave her lifestyle.

Part Two, Chapters I - VIII Analysis

Elisha plunges into the Antioch society, guided by Pappas and protected by Manto. Manto and Elisha are attracted to each other at once. Manto's power is displayed here, as well as the corruption of the Roman judicial system.

Another victim of Elisha's relentless pursuit of truth is Joshua, his old instructor and friend. Elisha is becoming more enamored with the lifestyle in Antioch and has fallen in love with Manto. Elisha is settling into the civilization of Antioch, recognizing its good and evil.

Elisha is learning that life is not necessarily better because he is no longer a rabbi; with that knowledge comes sadness. When he falls in love with Manto, who cannot ever be truly his, another of Elisha's dreams dies.



Part Two, Chapters IX - XI

Part Two, Chapters IX - XI Summary

Manto becomes a dear friend to Elisha, but they always have a third person present, so Rufus will not be concerned about their relationship. Three years pass, in which Elisha learns Greek literature. He feels that beneath the beautiful poetry and words there is a stark fear, yearning and regret. At this point, though, his disappointments in his discoveries are outweighed by the progress of his life plan. He begins studying history, then science. After 8 years in Antioch, Elisha writes a monograph outlining his plan for his life studies. The librarian encourages him to publish it, and suddenly Elisha is famous, receiving letters of commendation even from Athens. One day Elisha receives a letter from the head of the museum in Alexandria, and he rushes to show it to Manto. As the two friends stand together in joy over Elisha's success, Rufus arrives unexpectedly. He is angry and jealous, and although Manto soothes the situation and calms him, it is obvious Rufus still suspects Elisha.

Demonax of Cyprus, a Cynic moralist, comes to Antioch to lecture, and Elisha is excited to attend. Soon after, he arranges to meet with Demonax to see if the great man will take Elisha on as a student. Demonax refuses to take on the assignment, saying that after reading Elisha's monograph, he cannot teach him anything. Demonax notes that Elisha is still interested in metaphysics, while Demonax has studied all available information on that for years and found nothing to use. The two men expound on their theories, but Demonax instead recommends a friend who can outline Elisha's reading for him.

Poleman is the recommended instructor for Elisha, but Poleman is more of a librarian than a teacher; Elisha begins reading volumes of philosophy and processing what he is learning. One day Elisha sets out to attend an event where the Emperor Hadrian is presiding in Antioch. On the way, he gets lost, and encounters several rabbis. Akiba is one of them. The two men, once great friends, say only one word to each other before Akiba turns away, honoring the commands of the ex-communication Elisha has received. Pappas tells Elisha that Akiba is in Antioch to raise money for war against the Romans because of the Emperor's plan to turn Israel into a site for pagans. Elisha's bankers encourage him to sell his Palestinian investments immediately, but he refuses to believe anything will happen. Very soon afterwards, the Emperor issues an edict that a temple dedicated to Jupiter will be raised on Temple Mount. Elisha and Pappas visit Rufus to ask him to convince the Emperor to change his plans, but the meeting results in Elisha insulting Rufus.

Part Two, Chapters IX - XI Analysis

Happiness and success now comes to Elisha, but it is overshadowed by the fact he can never have Manto as more than a friend.



Elisha is running out of people who can instruct him, as his studies have taken him further than most men care to go. At this high level of philosophy, all that is left is for him to continue studying what has been written by those who have gone before him.

Elisha's peaceful studies are about to be interrupted with war between the Romans and the Jews of Palestine. He grossly underestimates his relationship with Manto's benefactor, Rufus, and is deeply hurt by Akiba's snub.

Part Two, Chapters XII - XIV

Part Two, Chapters XII - XIV Summary

War begins and rumors fly. The economy of the area is devastated, and Pappas and Elisha are forced to curtail their expenses and move to smaller apartments. The two friends differ on their beliefs about the Roman empire, with Elisha defending it at every turn. At first the Romans are defeated in the battles, but reinforcements arrive, and with them, the plague. Elisha confines himself to the library of the museum and tries to continue his studies. One day as he returns to his apartment, Manto's maid meets him with the news that Manto is dying. In their last conversation, Manto makes Elisha promise that he will never let anything get in his way of completing his great project. He makes the vow to her, and she dies in his arms.

In the fourth year of the war, a terrible blizzard sweeps Antioch. Elisha, who has moved to even sparer quarters to save money, spends more time in the library because it is heated. He is consumed with grief over Manto still but is making huge progress in his studies. He is content to work on it daily. One afternoon during the big storm, Elisha receives an order to go to Jerusalem to meet with Rufus. Pappas has received a similar document, and the two men begin their journey, not knowing what Rufus wants. As the two men travel back through the lands of their birth, they see the ravages of war, and that their homes have been destroyed.

When Pappas and Elisha arrive at Jerusalem, they realize Rufus has erected his headquarters on Temple Mount. Rufus tells them he needs information about Jews and expects them to supply that information or die. Pappas refuses, but Elisha accepts, keeping his vow to Manto that he will stay alive and let nothing interfere with his great studies. The only thing Elisha asks of Rufus is that Pappas be spared in return for the information Elisha will provide. Elisha is removed to begin his work in Caesarea, to provide the Romans with intelligence about their enemy, the Jews.

Part Two, Chapters XII - XIV Analysis

Elisha's world is falling apart: he is financially ruined; the great love of his life has died, and his home country is besieged with war.

Tension increases as Elisha is pulled from his warm library and studies to undertake a journey in the biting cold to see a man he despises but cannot refuse. Elisha's vow to Manto is tested when he is faced with the choice of helping the Romans or dying for his own people. He rationalizes that he must stay alive to continue his studies, therefore keeping his pact with the woman he loved. Pappas, who left Israel long ago to sample the Greek lifestyle and ways, turns out to be more of a patriot than the great rabbi Elisha. Here the reader sees just how committed Elisha is to his goal of seeking truth.

Part Two, Chapters XV - XVII

Part Two, Chapters XV - XVII Summary

Bethar is the last fortress facing the Roman army in Jerusalem, and faces a siege of monumental proportions, lasting over three years. The water is running out, and the people know that the Romans will soon overrun their town. One night the Roman soldiers hear eerie sounds of chanting and songs that seemed to die out one by one. The next day they take over the fortress and find that all of the Jews have committed suicide rather than face capture and torture by the Romans.

Under the guise of merchants attending a market, over thirty rabbis are able to meet in the attic of a friend in Lydda. They talk about keeping the faith alive, ordaining new rabbis, and how Elisha is helping the Romans. Five men are selected to be elevated to rabbi, and Rabbi Judah ben Baba is chosen to perform the ceremony. As the Romans take the land back from the Jews, colonists are given land and Jewish traditions and teachings are forbidden. Violators are executed. Judah ben Baba notifies the disciples they are ready to be ordained and gives a secret location for the ceremony. As soon as the ceremony is completed, the Romans find Judah and kill him.

The Jews of Palestine are enraged with the story of Judah's martyrdom, but they are encouraged that the new rabbis escaped without harm. An informer is able to transmit the names of the new rabbis and that information reaches Elisha in Caesarea. He has been working diligently for Rufus for over a year, suppressing his feelings for his people in order to survive, but when these names reach him, he decides not to reveal the names to Rufus, especially since one name is his beloved friend Meir. Rufus realizes Elisha has tried to deceive him, and arrests Elisha and Pappas. Rufus tells Elisha he will bring all the rabbis who have been condemned to trial and crucify them all. Elisha, says Rufus, will not be crucified but sit with a harlot while the trial is proceeding.

Part Two, Chapters XV - XVII Analysis

The story of Bethar relates the determination and courage of the Jewish people, who would rather die of their own swords than surrender. It is a marked contrast between them and the choice Elisha has made.

The commitment of the Rabbis is shown in their attempts to continue their faith. Men are willing to die in order to further the cause in which they believe.

By the time his friends are imprisoned, it is far too late for Elisha to be rebelling, as his assistance to the Romans has allowed them to defeat the Jews and bring many of their sages to trial and death. Elisha tries to reason with Rufus, but Rufus is too angry about Manto's love for Elisha to be calmed.

Part Two, Chapters XVIII - XIX

Part Two, Chapters XVIII - XIX Summary

Elisha goes to the prison where his fellow rabbis are being held and finds Pappas there as well. Elisha apologizes, but Pappas is actually glad his friend has finally come back to being a Jew. Pappas says conditions in the jail are terrible, but sometimes peddlers come by and they are able to get food from them. Elisha gives him money. As one of the peddlers comes by singing their wares, Elisha realizes messages are being sent as well because some of the words are in Hebrew. Elisha recognizes Akiba's voice answering the peddler, deciding cases in Jewish Law. Elisha is amazed to find that even on their death row, the rabbis still believe the faith will survive. Akiba has predicted that the Roman Empire will someday fall, but the Jewish faith will remain and prosper.

The execution of the rabbis is long and bloody and does not provide the entertainment the Romans thought it would. Instead, the great sages go to their deaths in dignity, displaying their faith. Elisha is forced to watch, with a harlot his only companion. He is stunned and haunted and does not leave the arena until the next day when the attendants find him. He is taken to the home of Nicholas, who cares for him. As soon as he is able, Elisha returns to Antioch to complete his studies, a broken man.

Part Two, Chapters XVIII - XIX Analysis

Elisha is shamed by the dedication of his fellow rabbis and even that of his old friend and sometimes-Jew Pappas. The strength of the faith is expected to outlast even the vast studies and wisdom of the Romans and Greeks.

Everything has been taken from him, including his friends and his dignity, yet Elisha weakly makes his way back to his true love - his project.



Part Two, Chapter XX

Part Two, Chapter XX Summary

Many years later Charicles the philosopher is speaking at Antioch, and in his audience is an elderly man with white hair and a ravaged face. At first Charicles tries to avoid talking to him, but Elisha introduces himself and begins speaking, Charicles is interested. The two men discuss the highest levels of philosophy, speaking only as men who have devoted their lives to the study of it can do. Charicles finally says that mathematics and science could also be myths; there are no proofs that Euclid was correct beyond doubt. This statement shakes Elisha to his core, and he finally reaches his great truth. He experiences a great feeling of failure, seeking a reasoned certainty that would explain everything, including faith, only to find that the quest was in vain.

Part Two, Chapter XX Analysis

The conversation with Charicles is Elisha's great undoing. He has based his entire life and course of studies on the fact of mathematics and now he is realizing that even this could be a myth, a miracle, just as he began to believe the Jewish tradition and stores were. It is this realization which kills him.



Part Two, Chapter XXI & Epilogue

Part Two, Chapter XXI & Epilogue Summary

Elisha returns to his native land, and on the road to Caesarea encounters Meir. Meir can see the disillusionment in his old master's eyes. Meir explains that the Sanhedrin is meeting again, and the faith has withstood all the Romans could throw at it. Meir asks Elisha to come home with him, but Elisha says he is on a long journey. Meir walks with him until they reach the boundary where Jews are not allowed to cross on the Sabbath. Elisha tells Meir that faith and reason are not antagonists as Elisha has believed all his life, that they coexist and commingle. As the two men part, Meir watches Elisha walk away until he can no longer be seen.

Lightning has struck Elisha's grave, and Meir hurries to the site. He remembers how they were told Elisha was dying, being cared for by Nicholas, and how Meir fought to allow Elisha to be buried in his town's cemetery. Meir weeps at Elisha's grave, remembering the man he had loved so much, and for himself and his wife, and for all those whose dreams die.

Part Two, Chapter XXI & Epilogue Analysis

Elisha, defeated and restless, continues his quest for answers, based upon his new view of faith and reason being paired together. He retains his free reason and speculation and accepts his fate as a man without a religion, without a country. Elisha's life was one of controversy and dissent, of questioning and seeking for truth. Meir honors his old master with a place of honor in the cemetery where he lives and mourns him and all men who dream great dreams.



Characters

Elisha ben Abuyah

Elisha is frail as a child, but after living with Joshua, becomes a tall, slender, bronze and wiry man. He has intense blue eyes. He is wealthy and well regarded in Palestine and becomes an apprentice to a compassionate and learned Rabbi. Once Elisha becomes a rabbi, he is excellent at his work, yet yearns for something more. He finally turns away from his faith and seeks a truth through studying Greek literature and science. Elisha becomes obsessed with this study, and it encompasses his entire life, at the expense of his friends, his family, his religion and his country. He dies an old ravaged man, beset with regret and disappointment.

In the novel, Elisha undergoes great change and growth but makes choices that cause him to end up alone. The choices seem noble and driven by conscious and intelligence, but the results are disastrous. Elisha begins life as a child of a non-believer in the Jewish community, and when his father dies, he is brought back to the Jewish traditions and becomes a celebrated and revered rabbi. But a series of circumstances makes Elisha turn away from his career, move to Antioch and seek another type of knowledge to supplement what he has been taught. He falls in love with Manto, learns the dark side of the Roman Empire, turns against his own people, and after many years realizes his quest was for nothing. He leaves Antioch and Galilee and travels through other lands until he dies.

Elisha is a man of great intelligence and was considerably influenced in his early years by his father and by Nicholaus. Elisha could never see the value in turning away any sort of knowledge, and this brought him into direct conflict with the Jewish views of his time. The Jewish elders had determined that truth could only be found in spending a lifetime studying the laws of Moses, interpreting them, and turning away from any other sources of learning. Elisha cannot resist learning about science, math, history, and all the other subjects that have been researched by non-Jews before his time.

Elisha's thirst for knowledge places him in a quandary as he seeks to serve his God and serve his own needs for knowledge. He follows the wishes of his guardian and his beloved mentors, colleagues and friends, but at the pinnacle of his career as a rabbi, he knows his is being false to himself by denying other forms of knowledge.

Elisha sacrifices everything to follow his mind and heart into study of Greek knowledge. He is ex-communicated, loses his wife, and commits himself completely to finding a methodology of explaining faith by using science.

Elisha never finds his answers and at the end of his life realizes he was chasing something that could never be caught and that his life, although interesting, intriguing and full of conflict and love, was wasted after all.



Manto

Elisha meets Manto the first night he is in exile in Antioch. Manto is a beautiful woman with light brown hair, pale skin and gray-green eyes. She is always dressed impeccably and runs a huge mansion like a dictator. She is the girlfriend and mistress of Rufus, a powerful Roman soldier, but falls in love with Elisha. She is pagan and street-wise and assists Elisha many times with her connections. At her death from plague, she exacts a vow from Elisha that keeps him committed to his studies long after her departure.

Manto represents Elisha's quest, personified. She is intelligent, beautiful, and nothing like a Jewish woman. She introduces Elisha to the ways of the Roman Empire, to everyone he has thirsted to meet, and she represents the type of woman he would really have preferred to marry. She is wise and businesslike, even though he is somewhat startled by her ruthlessness. He loves her completely and accepts her conditions that she can only love him emotionally and not physically. He returns to his quest for knowledge, suppressing his desire for her, and instead becomes her closest friend and confidant.

Manto is a product of her upbringing, and as a true citizen of Rome, she believes anything is excusable if it means your survival and your happiness. She conveys this feeling to Elisha, and he accepts it on a subconscious level as he continues to rationalize his behavior as acceptable because it has such a noble purpose.

Manto loves Elisha but is bound to Rufus because she owes her life to him. At the end of her life, it is Elisha who rushes to her side and tries to save her from the plague. She continues to elicit love and commitment from Elisha by making him vow to continue his quest for knowledge, and then she dies. This vow is the reason Elisha eventually becomes a traitor to the Palestine people by assisting the Romans with intelligence. Elisha thinks he is honoring his vow to Manto by allowing himself to continue his divine quest.

Pappas

Elisha's life long friend, Pappas is a Jew but partakes of all Greek life has to offer, choosing the society of Antioch above Palestine. He is irreverent and fun loving, but at the end, he returns to love of his country and sacrifices his own life rather than betray it.

Pappas is somewhat like Elisha, as he also finds pleasure in how the Greeks and Romans pursue life, but he does not invest his life into the pursuit himself. When all is at stake, Pappas is stronger in his faith than Elisha is.

Rufus

Marcus Tineius Rufus, is Pretorian Prefect of Palestine, commander of the Tenth Legion Fretensis, and one of the richest men in the Roman empire. He is not an attractive man,



but very powerful, and Manto is his mistress. He is very possessive and jealous of her, and when he realizes how much Manto cares for Elisha, he decides to destroy Elisha.

Nicholaus

Son of Zenothemis, Nicholaus was hired by Abuyah to instruct Elisha in Greek studies. Nicholaus is a tall, thin man with a large head, who has a high nasal voice. He joins the household when Elisha is five and has great affection for the boy. When Elisha decides to begin his pursuit of wisdom and truth, it is Nicholaus to whom he turns for books and referrals to other scholars. Nicholaus begins as a tutor but ends up as a lifelong friend.

Rabbi Joshua

Joshua has puffy cheeks, pock marked and wrinkled; his beard is messy; he has a huge belly and his nose is very large. One of the ugliest men in appearance that Elisha ever encounters, but a man with the purest faith and most beautiful of spirits. Joshua is Elisha's tutor in the ways of a sage and teaches him all he knows of Jewish tradition.

Akiba

Akiba is a Jewish man, a day laborer, who is the son of Joseph of Bnai Brak. A wood chopper by trade who decides to become a student late in life. He has taken on a life of learning and has a goal to become a rabbi and is studying under the great Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Akiba becomes a powerful sage and is extremely compassionate, even after Elisha is ex-communicated.

Deborah

Elisha's wife in an arranged marriage. She is not his first choice, and their time together is not happy. Deborah is not pretty but had a lovely voice. She has nice hair, a strong face, and her eyes were large and bright. Deborah was only happy when Elisha was a famous rabbi; when he began to doubt his faith, she removed herself from him in many ways. She was unkind to the servants and considered herself above many people. When they are divorced, she keeps an income and lives well until the Romans arrive and she flees.

Amram

Amram is Elisha's uncle, brother to Elisheba, Elisha's mother. Amram is a strict, traditionalist Jewish man and is very angry about the way Elisha is raised. When Elisha's father dies, Amram seizes the opportunity to educate Elisha in the Jewish tradition and abolishes all other studies from Elisha's life. Amram chooses Elisha's mate, determines his method of instruction, and manages Elisha's family estate until the



young man is old enough to take over. Amram cares deeply for Elisha but realizes that Elisha will never love him as the father he has tried to be to him. Amram dies soon after turning over the estate to Elisha; his last words are prayers that Elisha will continue on the Jewish path.

Meir

Meir is a young Jewish disciple who meets Elisha soon after Elisha's ordination as a rabbi, and remains Elisha's friend throughout Elisha's life, even after Elisha's ex-communication. Meir and his wife live in Usha, and because of their friendship and hospitality, Elisha stays many times with the family. Meir's twin sons are taken by the plague, but he and his wife continue their path on the Jewish way; whereas, the children's deaths represent a rift in faith for Elisha. At the end of the novel, it is Meir who assures Elisha he is still loved, and when Elisha dies, it is Meir who finds a grave for Elisha and tends it faithfully.

Beruriah

Beruriah is Meir's wife, the daughter of a revered and respected rabbi. She makes a wonderful home and is a good wife to Meir. Often Elisha thinks his life would have been better with a woman such as Beruriah by his side. Beruriah respects and admires Elisha, but when Elisha begins to fall in love with her, she expresses her devotion to her husband.



Objects/Places

Sanhedrin

This is the name of the assembly of 70 sages who interpret Jewish law in Elisha's time. These men were ordained rabbis, carrying on a tradition begun by Moses.

Phylactery

Also known as a tefillin, this is headgear worn by the sages that is made from sheepskin and contains parchment scrolls.

Antioch

The capital city of Syria, third largest city in the world of Elisha's time. It is on the river Orontes, and is the city where Elisha goes to live with Pappas when he leaves Israel.

Musaeum

This is the building where documents and specimens are kept, available for study by the populace. The one in the novel is located in Antioch and becomes the primary place for Elisha to continue his readings in search of his truth. All the scholars in Antioch gather there daily, somewhat like a church to wisdom

Caeserea

This seaside village in Israel is often used by the Romans as a headquarters. It is here where Elisha is sent to perform his intelligence services for the Romans during the Jewish insurrection

Temple Mount

The site of the first Jewish Temple and an extremely sacred place for the Jewish faith. It is believed this is the spot where God began creating the earth.

Roman Empire

The Jews of Palestine technically live under the rule of the Roman Empire, but the Sanhedrin and the rest of the Palestinian community live by their traditions and appoint their own judges to decide cases. The Jewish attitude is one of distaste towards the empire, and the people ignore their ways, insulating themselves against any Roman or



Greek influence. However, the Roman Empire does not ignore Palestine, and when a small revolt breaks out, the Empire sends its mighty army to stop it. Elisha goes from ignoring the Roman Empire with the rest of his people, to admiration for the system, to providing information to the Romans against his own people, to despising the Empire.

Elisha's Estate

Elisha's family home is on the outskirts of Migdal, in Galilee, in Palestine. It is a large estate with many servants and operates as a huge farm that produces grain, olive oil, flax, and much more. The estate is run successfully by the family until the war with the Roman Empire, when it is burned down and re-settled with Romans. The estate represents the wealth and success that Elisha turned his back on when he chose to leave everything and continue with his quest for answers.

Manto's mansion

Manto has been Rufus' concubine for over eight years, and one of her many benefits is a beautiful mansion in the heart of Antioch. The house is full of wine, servants, and comfortable furniture. Manto is the mistress and operator of it all. Her mansion represents the ultimate luxury to Elisha, and he arrives there often to bathe in her presence and to be surrounded by the excesses of pagan living. When Manto dies of the plague, the house is ransacked and left in ruins, much as Elisha's life.

Elisha's Grave

This grave is located in Galilee and symbolizes the life of Elisha. The grave is lovingly cared for by his only true friend, Meir, who fought the Jewish authorities to allow Elisha to be buried on Jewish ground. At the end of the novel, the grave is struck by lightning, a rare occurrence, which symbolizes that the life of Elisha had repercussions that extended well beyond his death.



Themes

Man vs Society

Elisha was raised in the strict and regulated structure of the early Jewish faith, which defined not only his appearance and wardrobe, but his daily life, with prayers and utterances at specific times. The author shows how very little deviation from the requirements was accepted by this society, and that the sages were held to a much higher standard to this lifestyle than an average Jewish citizen of Palestine.

Elisha's father was considered a Hellenizer, one who had sympathies for Greek culture. He shocked his colleagues, but they did not ostracize him for these beliefs. As Elisha ages, the Sanhedrin grows more powerful and more strict, and the question of whether Greek literature should be studied becomes a dividing point for the sages.

Elisha chooses to remove himself from the Jewish society after being elevated to its highest honors. The decision to choose ex-communication over living a lie is the pivotal point in this novel.

Man vs Self

Until the age of 10, Elisha was raised to study everything available to him in his time: Greek literature, Roman law, Jewish traditions. When his father dies, he is forced to study Jewish tradition only, but the seeds of doubt have already been planted. His father's dying wish is that Elisha will not be torn in two, yet Elisha spends his life trying to justify faith, truth, and science in his mind. Elisha's lifelong project of finding a scientific methodology that will give him a foundation for faith and science alike is what propels him to forsake friends, family, love and honor in order to find the answers he must have. He becomes his own worst enemy, and his life is unfulfilled.

Self Direction

Is a man free to choose his own life's direction? Or is a greater power the decider? Elisha's life was one of self-direction, as he rejected the sages' advice, the needs of his wife and the teachings of his faith to seek knowledge in whatever form he wants.

Elisha chose self direction, but at a great price. He consistently leaves whatever is important to him in order to continue his studies. Is this the behavior of someone who considers his own needs greater than those of anyone else? The reader must decide if the quest for a higher level of understanding is more important in life than surrounding one's self with friends, family, and faith.



Is a man's life shaped by his parents?

Elisha's father was a man who opened his education to Greek and Roman beliefs and lost his own faith in the Jewish tradition. Elisha goes on to become one of the most famous Jewish traitors in recorded history. Yet, the author shapes Elisha as a man who was just trying to find the truth and who wanted ultimately to prove that the Jewish traditions and miracles could be defined through science and math. Even though Elisha was exposed to pagan science and culture at a young age and was later seeped in the Jewish tradition, the message of freedom of thought persisted to stay with him, finally interrupting his life so much he is unable to continue as a Jewish rabbi. Was this a result of the teachings of Nicholaus and the influence of Elisha's father? Can a seed planted so early in life blossom and pervade the future of a life?



Style

Point of View

The author uses several points of view, but primarily the story is seen through Elisha's eyes. This allows the reader to experience the anguish and joy Elisha has about new information and to follow his progress in his search for truth.

At some points, there is an omniscient narrator showing the reader the Sanhedrin's deliberations, but predominately it is Elisha's eyes and thoughts that tell the story.

Elisha is the protagonist of the story, and the antagonist is not a person, but the Jewish view of the world at the time of Elisha's life. The point of view is First Person, as Elisha's view. Elisha's constant need for knowledge, his love of Meir, Manto, Pappas and Joseph, are all held close to him as he goes through life and faces the consequences of his choices.

It is through Elisha's thoughts and dialogues that the author presents his arguments for and against the methods of understanding God's instructions. Elisha clearly believes all knowledge is acceptable for seeking God's will, while the Sanhedrin and people Elisha loves and admires believe otherwise.

The conflicts and truth-seeking by Elisha symbolize a controversy of religion versus science that continues to present time, and the author has skillfully presented both views through the life, thoughts and actions of his character Elisha.

Setting

The novel is set in the first century after Christ, in a time when the Jewish faith is forming its rules and regulations based upon laws handed down from antiquity. The Jews are based in Palestine and are part of the Roman Empire, but follow their own religion and traditions.

Part One of the story is set in Palestine, at Elisha's villa. It follows him to Joshua's home, then in his travels as an apprentice, then a Rabbi. Part Two is set almost entirely in Antioch, with time in Caesarea, and some visits to Palestine.

The author uses the peacetime in Palestine for Elisha's early years, a time when he is learning and observing. As he becomes troubled with his faith, Israel itself becomes troubled and enters into war as Elisha abandons his home for his project. The testing of Jews by their God and by the Romans is similar to the tests Elisha faces with his devotion to his project.

When the author describes settings in Palestine, the country is beautiful and spare, representing the simplicity of life in the Jewish tradition. In Antioch and other places that



are bastions of the Roman Empire, there is voluptuousness, art, lectures, gatherings, and also the ugliness of gluttony and sin.

Language and Meaning

Hebrew and Greek terms are used frequently in the novel and create a sense of how people of that day and that region used many languages to communicate with each other. The rabbis speak profoundly when at the Sanhedrin and choose their words carefully. The Greeks speak freely and loosely and do not inhibit their words or their actions in any way.

The Sanhedrin and other Jews speak of law, of right and wrong, and adherence to the rules and regulations of their God. The society of Palestine is devoted to finding out what the purpose of life is for God's people; whereas, the society of the Roman Empire is bent on personal satisfaction, with knowledge pouring into brains along with sensuality, hedonism, greed and other temptations.

The Jewish people are presented as people devoted to their families, maintaining a family unit, traditions and respect for their religion. The people in Antioch are concerned with the latest fad, having mistresses, orgies and giving in to every whim and passion they encounter.

Structure

As a Driven Leaf is divided into sections as follows: Prologue, Part One 27 chapters, Part Two 21 chapters, Epilogue. Part One follows the protagonist, Elisha ben Abuyah, from his birth to his midlife in the Palestine Jewish communities, at which time, he reaches a crisis of the spirit and leaves his career, his family and his friends to search for answers to the questions that obsess him. Part Two details his quest for knowledge through meeting famous philosophers and scientists in Antioch, Syria, and his transformation from a Jewish rabbi to a Greek scholar and Roman sympathizer.

The epilogue is brief and succinct, weaving the brotherly love Meir had for his old master with an acceptance that Elisha believed in his quest.

Part One provides the explanation for Elisha's character and why a man would sacrifice his wealth, his family and his career to pursue an idea. Part Two shows the consequences of the decision Elisha makes at the end of Part One, the decision that will shape his life and cause his ultimate demise.

The chapters are well paced and the characters well drawn. The author does not use long descriptions or unnecessary conversations to move the plot forward, but the story continues briskly and logically. The author's themes are subtle and presented in an intelligent and thought-provoking manner.

Quotes

Prologue, Page 11, Patriarch Gamliel:

"Shall it be forbidden to a faithful Jew to study the tongue of the Greeks, to read their books and to think their thoughts after them?"

Prologue, Page 13, Rabbi Johanan:

"There is no Truth without Faith. There is no Truth unless first there be a Faith on which it may be based."

Part One, Chapter II, page 33, Abuyah:

"Because, as every sensible man knows, the Stoics are right when they say that nothing ever happens contrary to nature."

Part One, Chapter XIX, page 195, Elisha

"'Nothing,' he said heavily. 'There's nothing any of us can do. We all want more than life permits.'"

Part Two, Chapter IX, Page 363, Manto

"'I think,' she said abruptly, 'that there is something else I ought to make clear to you, Tineius. If ever you try to use your power against Elisha here, I shall even the score if it costs me my life.'"

Part One, Chapter VIII, Page 83, Deborah

"'I must say,' she cried. 'I do not understand your taste in friends. Here we are to travel two days and for what purpose? To enjoy the company of three men, all of them older than ourselves. Our host a woodcutter, our fellow guests a weaver and a petty merchant, each poorer than the other. You know, Elisha, among the sages and disciples there are men of your class with whom you might associate.'"

Part One, Chapter XIV, Page 137, Rabbi Eliezer

"Some among you may object to our withdrawal from contact with the pagan world. They may plead that it is immoral for us to keep our truth to ourselves. 'Throw open the windows,' they will argue; 'let the light go forth to the Gentiles.' A noble argument, doubtless - if only one could be certain that the great darkness would not engulf the little light."

Part Two, Chapter XXI, Elisha



"'Aye, I found,' the response came at last, soft-spoken and bitter, 'I found vanity and a striving after wind.'"

Part Two, Chapter XX, Charicles and Elisha

"'By all the gods,' he urged appeasingly, 'don't take it so seriously. It's only an academic question. Why, you act as though your life could be ruined by it.'"

"'It has been,' Elisha replied.

Part Two, Chapter XIV, Pappas

"'Elisha,' Pappas pleaded in Aramaic, 'no man can betray his own blood and face himself afterward. You were ready to risk your life for me; certainly you ought to do the same for a whole people.'"

Part Two, Chapter XII, Manto

"'You must finish your work. I denied my love of you for the sake of it...It would be too terrible if anything prevented your going on...You must promise me...Maybe, if thee is no other immortality, I shall live in the great book you will write...Promise me,' she repeated."

Epilogue, Page 477, Meir

"Then he bethought himself of the poor shattered body before him, and of the weary search that had worn it to death. He recalled its beauty in youth, and set against it its likeness in old age, black hair turned white, eyes burned out like ashes, a face drawn with despair, and lips too tired and too discouraged to speak."



Topics for Discussion

Is it better to restrict one's education to one source or to many sources?

Who was more of an influence in Elisha's life: Akiba or Nicholas?

Why does Shraga hate Elisha so much?

Why do the two Simeons go insane?

What are the differences between Elisha and his wife Deborah?

What is the author's attitude towards Elisha, an actual historical character?

Where does the author use foreshadowing in the plot?

What is Elisha's antagonist in this novel? Shraga, the Sanhedrin, the Jewish faith or himself?

How did Elisha change over the years?

Was the end result worth Elisha's many sacrifices?