Hidden in Plain Sight: An Ur-Text of Pirkei Avot Derived from Avot de Rabbi Nathan (ARN)

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The Search for Order in Pirkei Avot
The middle two chapters of Pirkei Avot do not seem to follow a consistent organizational pattern; the sages quoted are not in chronological order and are not addressing similar themes consistently. Commentators over the years have sought to address this issue, with some simply stating that chapters II-IV of Pirkei Avot have no order, while others have sought to create a structure in which the maxims are linked. By identifying the Ur-text of Pirkei Avot through the study of ARNA, one can identify the structure that was once more obvious, but was, perhaps, lost with subsequent interpolations and editorial changes.

Illustration--Linkages in Avot de Rabbi Nathan
As an illustration, we have captured here portions of Chapters 18, 19 and 20 of Avot de Rabbi Nathan. Within the larger text, only a few of the maxims identified have direct parallels in Pirkei Avot itself. Isolating these passages from the surrounding text, which in the large adumbrates the themes of the leading maxims, a linked set of maxims can be seen. These have parallels in the middle chapters of Pirkei Avot.

Avot de Rabbi Nathan
ARNA itself is organized as a series of chapters of Aggadic material, connected largely to a central maxim or theme stated at the beginning of the chapter or section. For the first 20 chapters of ARNA, the maxims being studied or elaborated upon are those of Pirkei Avot itself, mostly in the order of Pirkei Avot. These maxims can be identified easily through an overall structure, following a largely chronological order which prevails in Pirkei Avot itself, because these maxims are generally identified at the beginning of the chapters of ARNA. With some exceptions, the central maxims derive from the first two chapters of Pirkei Avot.

Avot De Rabbi Nathan (ARNA)
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Pirkei Avot and Avot de Rabbi Nathan
Pirkei Avot, Chapters of the Fathers, itself consists of five distinct chapters. There is a very clear order to the maxims of Pirkei Avot that appear in the first two chapters, which follow the sayings of the Fathers, organized on a chronological basis, more or less. The last (fifth) chapter of Pirkei Avot is a collection of enumerations, sayings or maxims, which provide a numerical listing or otherwise reference numbers, organized in descending order. These general organizational themes apply to the respective sections of ARNA as well, with additional enumerations which supplement those contained in Pirkei Avot in the latter chapters of Avot de Rabbi Nathan. Throughout, ARNA seems to be elaborating on an earlier text of Pirkei Avot. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to extract that Ur-text which served as the basis for the author(s) of ARNA, and examine it for insights into Pirkei Avot itself.

The three consecutive maxims here are linked linguistically. Rabbi Eliezer exhorts his listener to know the Almighty as a partner in the Brit, the Covenant. Akaviah emphasizes the knowledge of G-d as the ultimate Judge of humanity in parallel language and structure. The maxim of Rabbi Chanania is linked to that of Akaviah in a different way, but again, clearly parallel. In Pirkei Avot, due to editorial changes and a different choice of maxims, the linkages are blurred or lost.