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

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Development and Order of Pirkei Avot

Pirkei Avot, Chapters of the Fathers, is one of the most studied and influential Rabbinic texts of all time. The problem of the order of the Rabbinic maxims presented in Pirkei Avot is one which has been debated by commentators and scholars for many years. R. David Zvi Hoffman, in his seminal work, Mishnah Rashna, proposed that the chapters of Avot were put together over several generations, and did not come into its final form until a later period. The final text may also contain material that was added to the earlier text after the compilation of the Mishnah. The additions to the original text complicate the task of discerning the overall order.

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.

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.

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.

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 of Pirkei Avot. The three consecutive maxims here are linked linguistically. Rabbi Eliezer exhorts his listener to know what/how you shall respond to a heretic; and no word of Torah should be forgotten by you. Know before whom you toil and the One who is your partner in the Covenant and that your partner is trustworthy to provide you with reward for your labor. (end of Chapter 17)

Akaviah the son of Mehallalel says: Whoever places four things on his heart will no longer be led into Sin—(Know) From whence he comes, and to where he is traveling, what the future will bring and who is his Judge . . . the King, who is King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He (beginning of Chapter 19)

Rabbi Chananiah the Prefect of the Priests . . . says: Whoever places the words of Torah on his heart has removed from himself thoughts of the sword, thoughts of famine, thoughts of foolishness, thoughts of the Evil Inclination, thoughts of adultery, thoughts of empty matters and thoughts of the yoke of flesh and blood. . . (beginning of Chapter 20)

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.