CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Pirke Abot, the Chapters of the Fathers, has been read for edification and education by pious Jews in synagogue, school and home since antiquity. It has also introduced many Christians to Judaism, especially since its sayings have been presented as a compendium of Jewish ethics, ideals and wisdom. But Pirke Abot (henceforth PA) is primarily a tractate of the Mishna, even though it is unique among Mishna tractates in that it does not speak of law (halaka) governing some specific sphere of life. PA with its chain of authorities stretching from Moses to Judah the Prince's son, Gamaliel III, along with its stories about Johanan ben Zakkai and his disciples and its sayings by sages who lived in the time of the destruction of the Temple, anchors the whole Rabbinic tradition in antiquity and legitimizes its substance by reference to the early sages. The concrete function of PA within the Mishna and the exact message communicated by its structure, themes and genre will be the first object of this study.

Though PA lacks an Aramaic commentary in both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, it does have a Hebrew commentary which sometimes elucidates individual sayings and at other times elaborates or adds to the material in PA. As we shall see in succeeding chapters, the commentary, Abot de Rabbi Nathan (The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan) is not subsequent to and built around the Mishna Tractate Abot; rather Abot de Rabbi Nathan (henceforth ARN) includes much but not all of PA within it, sometimes in a variant form or in a different order. Consequently, PA and ARN developed within a common tradition to reach different and parallel forms. ARN exists in two versions, ARNA and ARNB. ARNA is customarily printed in the Talmud in the volume with PA and has been known and read for centuries. ARNB was discovered in manuscripts by Solomon Schechter in the last century and first published along with ARNA in 1887.¹ In ch. 2 of his introduction he cites numerous Medieval authors who used Version B when quoting ARN. Consequently, the two versions of ARN were both known in the tradition, but ARNA became more closely associated with the Babylonian Talmud and so better known. ARN follows the order of PA: the chain of tradition, Johanan ben Zakkai, the early sages

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and the enumeration sayings. Within this framework ARN contains an enormous fund of stories, sayings, exegeses and comments, some directly pertinent to PA and some relevant to the goals and themes of ARN. Though the two versions of ARN are not treatises or books in the modern sense, they each possess a sophisticated structural and thematic unity which derives from their setting and purpose.

The two versions of ARN have enough in common that both may be referred to together as ARN. But despite their common form and content, each stands alone as an independent literary entity. The analyses which follow will take each version separately to show its individuality within the common tradition. PA, which is much briefer and has a fixed place within the Mishna, will be treated first and in its entirety. It will then be available for comparison with ARN in the subsequent chapters. These three documents must be seen as part of a religious and cultural tradition which was both oral and written and which remained fluid over centuries. The authors and editors of these materials preserved, rearranged, rephrased, and reinterpreted with a freedom unknown to readers of the printed book, but with a reverence and respect for the past often lacking in those familiar with print. Detailed analyses will show the development of this tradition, insofar as it can be ascertained, and elucidate the meaning of the documents which have survived.

This volume intends primarily to understand what the documents which have survived actually say, individually and collectively. Theories about their origins and sources remain a secondary goal. Consequently, greatest attention will be given to the contents, order, structure, themes and emphases of the three surviving texts. A full understanding of their meaning requires an effort at locating them within Rabbinic literature and society. Theories about their provenience and orientation will arise from their contents, form and relationships to other documents. Finally, our research will peer into the past to discern how the whole tradition probably developed and how these three final works came to stand in their present relationship to one another.

The proximate scope of this investigation will be PA and the two versions of ARN. Since a complete commentary on all this material would fill at least three volumes, comments will be restricted to the literary structures and themes which carry the most weight within each work. Philological, textual and grammatical problems as well as exegetical details will be treated when
necessary to clarify or support a larger argument. Many passages in ARN have parallels in Rabbinic literature, especially in the Midrashim. Detailed comparisons to establish forms and priority among the versions is a specialized task beyond the scope of this study. Some parallels have been briefly analyzed to advance the argument in crucial passages. Similar materials in Greco-Roman literature have been cited in relation to certain themes and sections, though much more material is available for comparison.

The method used may be loosely classified as literary analysis. The texts have been primarily analysed in final form with hypotheses concerning origins and redaction following only when possible or appropriate. Since we are treating whole documents, larger structural features and major themes will dominate our investigation. Structure shows the parts in relation to the whole and identifies some parts as more important than others. Themes show the continuing interests of the authors, both conscious and unconscious, and they exercise a constant effect on the reader whose attention is controlled by those topics and exhortations most frequently and emphatically repeated. Themes function in a collection such as ARN in the same way that arguments function within a logical treatise. Both structure and theme give objective evidence for what is central and important. Comparative material will establish genres and the cultural setting of texts and themes.

Though Rabbinic literature resists historical analysis, some hypotheses concerning sources, development, additions, dates and social setting will be proposed in the course of the analysis and in the concluding chapters. The weight of the evidence in PA and ARN suggests that ARN originated in a school setting and that it functioned as an explanation and justification for a life based on study of Torah. A majority of the passages and themes, especially in the chain of tradition and the section on Johanan ben Zakkai and his disciples concern sages, study, Torah, disciples and other matters related to a school. All point toward a way of life centered on the study of and explicit obedience to Torah. Biblical authorities, verses and events are integrated into the Rabbis' self understanding in such a way as to provide continuity and authority for their way of life. In addition, Greco-Roman models and modes of expression can be discerned embedded in the Rabbinic material; they were probably absorbed from the culture of the Hellenistic and Roman Empires which fostered schools, religious societies and related literature. The internal relationships among blocks of teachings and comparisons of the two versions
of ARN with each other and with PA suggest that certain parts of PA and ARN came into existence during the second century and others during the third. The development of the texts can be established with probability for some passages while it remains obscure in many others. In all these historical inquiries the focus will remain on the final forms of the documents and their unique syntheses of Biblical, Rabbinic and Greco-Roman traditions.

Contents

The succeeding chapters carry out steps in the analysis of PA and the two versions of ARN and gradually amass data and conclusions which are summarized in the final chapters. Ch. 2 examines PA as a whole, since it is included in both versions of ARN. Examination of the literary structure and composition, sources and redaction, genre and purpose, Greco-Roman influences, themes and historical setting prepare us for treatment of these same topics at greater length in the chapters on ARN. Since PA has a firm context in the Mishna and is more tightly organized than some parts of ARN, it provides a good test for method and an example of one direction in which the tradition moved.

Chs. 3 to 8 study the literary structure and themes of the four major sections of ARN. The sections are: 1. The chain of tradition (ARN, chs. 1-13; ARNB chs. 1-27); 2. Johanan ben Zakkai and his disciples (ARN, chs. 14-18, ARNB, chs. 28-31); 3. The early sages (ARN, chs. 31-41; ARNB, chs. 32-35); 4. Enumeration sayings (ARN, chs. 31-41; ARNB, chs. 36-48). Each chapter first analyzes ARNA and then ARNB. In the analysis of ARNB significant similarities and differences between the two versions are pointed out. In both parts the distinctive natures of the two versions are preserved.

Ch. 3 gives a broad overview of the literary structure of each version and summarizes the contents of each section. Ch. 4 is the longest and most laborious as it traces the extensive complex of stories, sayings and exegeses united under the chain of tradition. This part of ARN received the greatest elaboration and it is for the chain of tradition that both PA and ARN are best known. Ch. 5 takes the results of ch. 4 and sketches the structure of the chain, shows how it developed and establishes the nature and purpose of this genre within a Greco-Roman and Jewish context. Ch. 6 argues that the section on Johanan ben Zakkai and his disciples is most influenced by Greco-Roman models and that virtually all the materials are oriented toward establishing and defining a
Rabbinic school similar in significant ways to the Greco-Roman schools of philosophy. Ch. 7 shows that the sayings of the early sages (late first and early second centuries) generally support the themes and purposes enunciated in and implied by the first two sections even though this part of ARN is less tightly organized than the previous two. Finally, ch. 8 examines the sequence and content of the enumeration sayings as well as their function in other cultures. Though the enumerations stand apart from the rest of ARN in their form, they set forth the fundamental institutions and ideas of Judaism and in their way serve the same purpose as the chain of tradition.

Ch. 9 gathers together the literary data and observations from the previous chapters and enlarges on the conclusions drawn there. Similarities, differences, relationship to the Talmuds and the literary origins of ARN are all treated. Ch. 10 gathers together the evidence for the hypothesis that ARN is closely related to a Rabbinic school, further defines the meaning of that concept and suggests dates for the development of the major part of the texts as we have them.

Secondary Literature

Little has been written directly on ARN, though many studies treat individual aspects of it. The one major book, often cited in the notes, is by Louis Finkelstein, entitled Mabo le-Massektot Abot we-Abot d'Rabbi Nathan (Introduction to the Treatises Abot and Abot of Rabbi Nathan.) Finkelstein utilizes all the manuscripts and a comparative analysis of content to propose several sources lying behind the texts as we have them. These sources are assigned partly to the Schools of Hillel and Shammai. Though we do not accept his entire theory, many of his observations are useful and his major conclusions are summarized in ch. 3. Judah Goldin, who translated ARNA, wrote an article which compared in detail the tendencies in ARNA with those in ARNB. In a number of parallel passages ARNA stresses study of Torah and ARNB stresses good deeds. Goldin acknowledges that both themes occur in both versions, but he highlights the peculiar emphases of each version. In ch. 9 his results are compared with those arrived at here. In general, our investigation looks at the larger literary units and structures which are common to both versions of ARN while Goldin's article picks up the subtle differences which give each a special character.
Goldin has written several other articles on individual pericopae in ARN which will be cited along with other literature in the appropriate places.

Torah

Since Torah is mentioned so often in PA and ARN and has such a wide range of meanings, a preliminary description of Torah will be given. The word Torah means direction or instruction, and hence guidance and oracle. In the Hebrew Bible Torah can be something as simple as parents' instruction to their children. It also denotes an oracular response by a priest and the word of God communicated through a prophet. In Isaiah 8:16 it seems to mean the prophet's own system of teaching and his instruction in the principles of religion. In the Septuagint Torah is translated most often by the Greek word nomos. Nomos can denote several things, including generally recognized custom, natural principles and laws derived from a legal system. C.H. Dodd held that Hellenistic Judaism turned the Biblical Torah into law narrowly understood. (Cf. the narrow meanings of English "law" and Latin "lex"). J.A. Sanders correctly criticized Dodd's position for making too sharp a distinction between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism. Both Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism retained a broad understanding of Torah and nomos.

The precise meanings of Torah in PA and ARN will emerge in the course of this study. To initiate the discussion, a few generalities will suffice. In the words of George Foot Moore, "Torah in one aspect is the vehicle, in another and deeper view it is the whole content of revelation." Torah can refer to the Bible which is written revelation; most properly Torah is the Pentateuch, but it can mean the whole Bible as well. Torah also includes customs and traditions closely or loosely related to the Bible and any other teachings integrated into the whole complex of Judaism. Josephus says, "The Pharisees have passed on to the people certain regulations handed down by former generations and not recorded in the Laws of Moses." Rabbinic literature calls these customs and later teachings as well as the whole Rabbinic corpus of midrash, mishna, etc. oral Torah, that is Torah delivered to Moses on Sinai orally rather than in writing. While ARN makes no mention of oral Torah explicitly, it is clear from context that Torah includes both the Bible and all the traditions, laws and interpretations which constitute the Rabbinic tradition. This whole body of learning is the object of study so strongly urged in ARN. Torah is
seen ultimately as the self revelation of God, God's will and the only mode of human access to God. Torah is for the authors of PA and ARN and much of the Rabbinic tradition the supreme symbol for God and a godly life. It includes not only laws, but stories, myths, images, and ethical statements, that is, both halaka and haggada.