

PIRKE Aboth :

AN INTRODUCTION TO RABBINIC THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

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Pirke Aboth: An Introduction to Rabbinic Thought and Practice

(This introduction is written having in mind a class of seminary students in the Evangelical Seminary at Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, representing Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Disciples, and Congregational churches.)

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The picture that we Christians have of the Jewish faith has usually been limited to the perspective that the New Testament affords us. In the different gospels and epistles the relationships with the Jews are not handled in a homogeneous manner, but the picture is generally a negative one. Paul in his letter to the Romans is carrying on a polemic with his own fellow Israelites in respect to the messianic timetable. He argues that the Messiah has come in Jesus Christ and is chagrined that the Jews as a nation have not accepted him. However, he interprets Israel's rejection in the most positive way, arguing that Israel's hardening has opened the door to the Gentiles and that when the fullness of the Gentiles comes in then all Israel will be saved (cf. Rom. 9-11). In the synoptic Gospels Jesus is definitely presented as in conflict with the Pharisees and other parties of the Jews, often in respect to matters pertaining to the oral tradition. According to them, the Jewish authorities finally succeed in forcing Pilate, the Roman governor, to crucify him. Luke especially is interested in representing the Jews in the worst possible light and in shifting the blame for the death of Jesus from the Romans to the Jews. In his Acts of the Apostles the Jews are presented as the ones who

stir up trouble and the Christians as the law-abiding citizens.

In the Gospel of John the antagonism toward the Jews is even more intense than in the synoptic Gospels. The specificity of the issues presented in the latter is lost sight of and the Jews are condemned en masse.

It is this picture of the Jews that is available to the Christian reader in the New Testament. There is an obvious mixture of history and apologetics, coupled with genuine theological differences, which is very hard to untangle.

It is on account of this picture of Judaism that it is difficult for a group of seminary students in a Latin American situation and with no major contacts with present-day Judaism to appreciate from the inside the genius and moving principles of rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism that survived the catastrophe of the Roman-Jewish War of the year 70 C.E. and of which the Jews of today are the heirs. To our way of thinking there is no better way to introduce a Christian into the world of rabbinic thought and practice than by a study of the topics touched upon in Aboth, the ninth tractate of the fourth division of the Mishnah. Since rabbinic literature is foreign to most Christians, it is necessary to define certain terms in order to place Aboth in the context to which it belongs.

Mishnah as a general term designates "the branch of Jewish learning which has particularly to do with the rules of the traditional law (halakot) as such"¹. It was the Pharasaic party among the Jews which at least from the second century before the C.E.

¹ George Forte Moore, Judaism, I, p. 150.

took over the field of traditional law and made it their responsibility to study and teach its rules as a distinct branch of learning. These rules (halakot) are the accepted decisions of the rabbis and are usually but not necessarily derivable from the Scriptures.

The Mishnah branch of learning stands in contrast to Midrash, a method of studying which was undertaken on the basis of the scriptural text, especially the Pentateuch. The Midrash type of study--as the verbal root indicates--was carried out by inquiring meticulously into a given text to make it yield its meaning. It can be either haggadic or halakic, that is, it can be concerned with a legendary, historical, ethical or narrative material or strictly with legal regulations. Both the Midrash and the Mishnah ways of studying were cultivated in the rabbinic schools in the second century of the C.E. At that time there existed numerous Mishnah and Midrash collections.

Specifically, the term Mishnah refers to the codification of the traditional law issued by Judah ha-Nasi (Rabbi) at the end of the second century C.E. This codification is not the product of ~~the~~ Rabbi alone, but behind his redaction stands the work of R. Meir and R. Akiba. To Akiba is attributed its systematization into six divisions (sedarim) and sixty-three subsections or tractates (Massektoth). It was this Mishnah which became authoritative for the Jews in Babylon and Palestine from the third century on and served as the basis for the Talmud in

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both places. Talmud in this sense refers to the comprehensive designation for the Mishnah and the discussions (in the Aramaic tongue) which were carried on by the Amora'im and adjoined to it. The discussions go by the technical name of Gemara, literally completion or perfection. The Amora'im are the Jewish doctors who were active from the time of the conclusion of the Mishnah to the end of the fifth century. The teachers of the preceding period are called Tannaim, being the transmitters and formulators of the tradition from Shammai and Hillel down to the contemporaries of Judah the Patriarch. ~~Some~~ haggadic material is present in Rabbi's Mishnah (Aboth, almost exclusively; also at the conclusion of some of the tractates).²

Finally, Mishnah can also refer to a single statement or paragraph in the official Mishnah.

It is within the Mishnah collection of Judah the Patriarch that Aboth stands as the ninth tractate of the fourth division (Nezikim "Damages").

Aboth was the original title of this portion of the Mishnah, just as other tractates had their distinctive names, such as Berakoth, Joma, Gittin, etc. The term perak means chapter. For purposes of study the tractates were divided into chapters (perakim). A given group of chapters form a tractate, in the present case Chapters of Aboth or Pirke Aboth. Pirke, therefore, does not refer to the sayings of the individual teachers but to the five chapters which originally formed the tractate and which

² Cf. Peah, Yoma, Taanith.

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later became six, after Aboth was incorporated into the Jewish literature. *liturgy*

The title Aboth can be interpreted variously. Israelstam in his introduction to Aboth gives three possible meanings:³

(1) Aboth can mean the religious teachers mentioned therein, thought of as the spiritual "Fathers" of Israel. (2) The teachings of the tractate are the "Fathers," that is, the begetters of further ethical teachings or the "principles" from which the detailed rules of life can be derived. (3) The term Aboth can also be understood in view of the expression Massoreth Aboth, "that which has been handed down by the 'Fathers'" and its correlative Kabbaloth Aboth, "that which has been received from the 'Fathers'".

This corresponds to the _____ and _____ of Josephus (cf. Jos. Ant. 13, 297). In this latter case Aboth would be a most fitting title for the first division of the tractate where the terms Masar (he handed down) and Kibbel, (he received) are used. The title in this sense could cover also the rest of the tractate, as kibbel reappears in 2:8 and the authority of the Rabbis is to be assumed for the whole of it.

To our way of thinking all three of the above definitions throw light on the term Aboth as used here, but the second seems to be the most appropriate as the tractate contains in summary fashion the basic tenets of rabbinic Judaism. The third definition, however, brings out the fact that these principles rest on the

³ The Babylonian Talmud, I. Epstein, ed. p. XI.

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authority of the great teachers of Israel. The oral tradition which they have handed down, according to Aboth, goes all the way back to Moses and therefore has the authority of revelation. It is a tradition which stands on the same footing as the written Torah (1:1). The presence of the succession of teachers seems to be intended both as a historical statement and as an authoritative one.

As already insinuated, Aboth can be seen as a microcosm of rabbinic thought. Essentially it is haggadah, in this case mainly ethical, but it touches on various themes which constitute the warp and woof of Jewish faith and practice. In the remainder of this presentation we shall endeavour to point out some of these topics.

1. The Concept of Oral Tradition

This point was touched upon above but must be considered further. The whole of chapter one is taken up with those who have handed down the oral tradition. The chain starts with the giving of the Torah to Moses at Sinai and ends with the fall of Jerusalem. The earlier stages are merely mentioned: Moses, Jeshua, the Elders, the Prophets. The more detailed presentation starts with the men of the Great Synagogue, referring to Ezra and the Seferim, the ancestors of the Pharisees and in a real sense their spiritual fathers. From there on, to the men of the Great Synagogue and to every one of the great teachers after them, one or more sayings are assigned. The chain of tradition is interrupted in 2:1-3 where Rabbi is quoted, but resumed in 2:4 with Hillel

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again. It concludes in 2:8 with Hohanon b. Zaccal and his disciples. Presumably, since after the Jewish War only the Pharisees survived, the oral tradition was not any more a bone of contention.

It was the concept of oral Torah handed down by a chain of eminent and authorized teachers that distinguishes the Pharisees from the Sadducees, who accepted only the Pentateuch as their norm and rejected the oral traditions. It was the concept and reality of the oral Torah that made possible the development of the Midrashim, the Mishnah and the Talmud. By permitting new interpretation by teachers following definite rules of interpretation (middot), the Pharisees made possible the application of the law to new situations and also the continuation of Judaism as a distinct religious stance. As Aboth itself puts it: "The tradition (תורה שבעל פה) is a fence around the Torah" (3:14).

2. Torah and study

If there is one theme that dominates Aboth, it is the necessity to study Torah. Torah has to be understood as including both the written and oral Torah. Both are divinely given. To study and practice Torah is really to know God; it is to "think God's thoughts after him," to use Kepler's phrase. Once this conception of the nature of revelation is developed, it can easily be seen how the prophet and the priest become obsolete figures. Their place is taken by the teacher and the disciples (cf. 1:1). In rabbinic circles Torah is equivalent to wisdom and the rabbi who studies, teaches, and practices Torah is the wise man.

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Abboth again and again brings in the topic of Torah, study and learning. A quotation from 6:7 shows the importance and all-inclusiveness of Torah: "Great is the Torah, for it gives life to them that practice it both in this world and in the world to come."⁴

Other sayings have the same ring:

- 1:15 Shammai: "Make thy [study of the] Torah a fixed habit."
- 2:12 Rabbon Gamaliel ϕ . R. Judah the Patriarch: "Excellent is the study of the Torah, for toil in them beth puts sin out of the mind."
- 2:6 Hillel: "Say not, when I have leisure I will study, perchance thou wilt never have leisure."
- 2:7 Hillel: "The more study of the Torah, the more life; the more schooling the more wisdom."
- 2:8 Rabbon Johanan b. Zaccai: "If thou hast wrought much in the Torah claim not merit for thyself, for to this end thou wast created."
- 2:12 R. Jose: "Fit thyself for the study of the Torah, for [the knowledge of] it is not thine own inheritance."
- 2:14 R. Tarfen: "If thou hast studied much in the Torah, much reward will be given to thee."
- 3:2 R. Hannia: "If two sit together and words of the Torah [are spoken] between them, the Divine Presence rests between them." (cf. 3:6)
- 3:5 R. Nehunya b. Ha-Kanah: "He that takes upon himself the yoke of the Torah, from him shall be taken away the yoke of the kingdom and the yoke of worldly care."
- 4:5 R. Ishmael: "He that makes profit out of the words of the Torah, removes his life from the world."
- 4:6 R. Jose: "He that honours the Torah is himself honoured by mankind and he that dishonours the Torah shall himself be dishonoured by mankind."

⁴ The quotations in this paper are from Herbert Danby's translation.

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4:10 R. Meir: "Engage not overmuch in business but occupy thyself with the Torah."

5:21 Juda b. Tema: "At five years old ^T[one is ready] for the Scripture, at ten years for the Mishnah, at thirteen for [the fulfilling of] the commandments, at fifteen for the Talmud."

These are a great number of the references to Torah and the necessity to study it that appear in Aboth. There are others but these suffice to give the student an idea of what is important in Aboth and for that matter, in the whole of rabbinic literature.

3. Practice of Torah

Study of the Torah does not suffice. In several places in Aboth the point is brought out that studying and doing go together. This also holds for rabbinic Judaism as a whole.

1:2 Simon the Just: "By three things ^{is} the world sustained: by the Law, by the Temple service, and by deeds of loving kindness."

3:10 R. Hanina b. Dosa: "He whose works exceed his wisdom, his wisdom endures; but he whose wisdom exceeds his works, his wisdom does not endure." (cf. 3:18)

Besides these references to deeds of mercy and works, there are some general references to justice and love towards the fellow man.

1:2 Hillel: "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, and pursuing peace, loving mankind, and bringing them nigh to the Torah."

1:15 Shammai: "Receive all men with a cheerful countenance." (cf. 3:12)

2:10 R. Eliezer: "Let the honour of thy fellow be dear to thee as thine own."

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2:12 R. Jose: "Let the property of thy fellow be dear to thee as thine own."

4. Occupation

1:10 Shemaiah: "Love labour."

2:2 Rabban Gamaliel b. R. Judah the Patriarch: "Excellent is the study of the Torah together with worldly occupation, for toil in them both puts sin out of mind. But all study of the Torah without [worldly] labour comes to naught at the last and brings sin in its train."

All the statements in 3 and 4 in respect to deeds of mercy, love of fellow man and worldly occupation bring the study of the Torah in contact with the life situations of men. In this context the study of the Torah is no mere intellectual pastime but a diligent effort to obey the will of God in its entirety. Judah b. Tema has put it graphically: "Be strong as the leopard and swift as the eagle, fleet as the gazelle and brave as the lion to do the will of God" (5:30). There is a depth to this obedience which cannot merely be categorized as prudent humanism but is rather rooted in the faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of love and justice.

Of course, it must not be forgotten that these ethical and practical statements are only one part of the obedience demanded by the Torah. Obedience to the innumerable legal regulations is part and parcel of the demand. But the important thing to be remembered is that whether the demand be ethical, legal or otherwise, obedience is not postulated on the basis of prudent calculations but on the motive of love. Obedience to the Torah is to

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be for its own sake (lishmah), or what amounts to the same thing, for the sake of heaven (i.e. God): "Let all thy actions be for the sake of heaven" (2:12; cf. 2:2). Reward () is expected as a matter of course, but it is not what the Jew strives for (cf. Aboth 1:3).

5. Israel as the Chosen People

3:15 Akiba: "Beloved is man for he was created in the image of God."

"Beloved are Israel for they were called children of God."

"Beloved are Israel, for to them was given the precious instrument, still greater was the love in that it was made known to them that to them was given the precious instrument by which the world was created."

In these beatitude-like statements of Akiba we have a whole theological outlook--the consciousness of the Jewish people of being God's chosen people, coupled with the fact of their being entrusted with the Torah. These two *Peci* are perhaps the two basic tenets of Judaism and is undoubtedly what has kept them going as a religious group up to the present time. It gives them a consciousness of unity and at the same time differentiates them from the surrounding community.

There are other aspects of rabbinic Judaism present in Aboth: retribution (1:7; 2:7; 5:8,9), repentance (2:10, 4:11, 17; 5:18), prayer (2:13), reward (2:1, 16; 5:5,22), world to come (2:16; 3:11,12; 4:5, 16, 17; 5:19), judging (1:6, 8, 9; 4:5, 8, etc.), free will (3:16; 6:2), merit (2:2; 6:11).

The fact that all the themes considered and mentioned above are present in Aboth, confirms the main purpose of this presenta-

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tion, namely, to point out that the Christian minister who wants to study Judaism from the inside does well to start with Aboth. A serious study of this tractate together with supplementary reading on specific topics from other parts of rabbinic literature will give the beginning student a balanced picture of what rabbinic Judaism is all about.

The importance of Aboth was recognized by the rabbis, and in time the treatise was included in the Jewish liturgy to be read between Passover and Pentecost. It is no wonder that a famous Babylonian teacher of the fifth century could say: "He who wants to become truly pious and virtuous, let him study and practice the teachings of Aboth" (B. K. 30 a).

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