Pirqé Avot and Wisdom Tradition

Maurice Gilbert, S.J.

The tractate of the Mishnah called the Sayings of the Fathers is generally recognized as part of the ancient wisdom literature. In 1975, the French Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible, in its introduction to the version of the book of Ben Sira, mentions that this book “must be put in parallel with the fundamental treatise of Jewish literature, the Sayings of the Fathers (Pirqé Avot).”¹ In 1984, writing on “Wisdom Literature,” I indicated that Pirque Avot is related to wisdom literature.² In 1990, Isaac B. Gottlieb wrote a paper on “Pirqe Abot and Biblical Wisdom” and another in 2011 on “Pirqe Abot as Wisdom Literature.”³

Now, if we agree that Pirqé Avot were written, at least for their first five chapters, at the beginning of the third century CE, we must not forget that, for the same period, we also have other collections of sapiential aphorisms. I will mention just three of them. The Sentences of Sextus is a Greek compilation of 610 aphorisms originating from a pagan milieu, but reviewed by a Christian during the second or even the third century CE, and later translated into Latin.⁴ The Teaching of Silvanus, discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in the middle of the 20th century, is a Christian monastic tractate written in Coptic during the third century CE, in which the relation between wisdom and Christ is stressed.⁵ The Wisdom of the Egyptian Menander is only transmitted in Syriac; this collection of about one hundred aphorisms was written by a pagan who was open

---

to Judaism.6 In these pages, I will take the *Teaching of Silvanus* as the text of comparison.

In his two articles, Isaac B. Gottlieb already made an excellent comparison between the Sayings of the Fathers and biblical wisdom literature. It is unnecessary to repeat his observations. My purpose is simple. I would like to say something about the succession of teachers or masters in the first four chapters of these *Sayings of the Fathers*, and then analyse the tripartite wisdom instructions that occur so often in them.

1 The Succession of the Masters

Let us start with the succession of masters. As an introduction, let me give a summary of each chapter.7

Chapter 1 gives the succession from Moses to Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel, one of the masters of the first century CE; but, at the centre of the chapter, five times two masters are presented together before distinguishing between them, the last pair being that of Hillel and Shammai (1:12–15). The chain of the tradition is clearly indicated from Moses, who received the torah at Sinai and delivered it to Joshua (1:1), and so on successively till Hillel and Shammai (1:12): with all the names mentioned, the whole period before the common era is covered. The majority of the sayings, except for five times, comprises three elements to which I will return. The themes mainly concern the judge and the torah.

Chapter 2 gives, without an explicit chain of succession, a series of masters starting with Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, son of Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel (1:18), and his son Gamaliel (2:1–4); then Hillel (2:5–8, continuing 1:12–14), ancestor of Rabbi; then Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, disciple of Hillel and his five disciples (2:9–18). The last name, Tarphon (2:19–20), concludes the chapter. Here again, the torah is one of the most frequent themes (2:1, 2, 8, 9, 16, 18, 20), and there are also frequent references to moral behaviour. The literary

---