Pirke 'Abot 1:2 (3) and the Synoptic Redactions of the Commands to Love God and Neighbor

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I. INTRODUCTION

Critical study of Jesus’ teaching about love for God and neighbor (Matt 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28) always includes some attention to external evidence for both the form and content of the redaction. The point is commonly made that the twin commands had already been joined prior to the first century.1 However, these extra-biblical data are not able to account for the synoptists’ different renderings of Jesus’ teaching; nor do they explain how these two commands impinge upon Scripture, cult and ethics. Consequently, it is the purpose of this article to argue that ‘Abot 1:2 (3) and its subsequent transmission in Judaism may help redaction critics to address these issues2 with greater precision. Our procedure will be to describe the phenomena within the redactional framework of each Gospel, introduce the pertinent “background” evidence, and then attempt to explain the relation between them.

II. GOSPELS PHENOMENA

The Love Commandments

In Matthew, Jesus is asked about “the great commandment in the law” (22:36). He responds with the deuteronomic injunction (6:5) to love God with all of one’s faculties, calling this “the great and first commandment” (v 38). The command to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Lev 19:18) is “like” the first; and upon both

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all the law and prophets “hang” (or may be derived from both, v 40).³ In Mark, the scribe’s question is more universal in that he asks Jesus to identify the commandment which is “the first of all” (12:28). After citing the love commands, He declares quite absolutely that “There is no other commandment greater than these” (v 31). Unique to Mark, however, is the repetition of Jesus’ response by the scribe (vv 32-33a) who then goes on to subordinate “all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” to them (v 33b). When, according to Luke, a nomikas asks what he must do to inherit eternal life (10:25), Jesus directs him to find the answer in the Law. In reply, the expert cites the twin commands as “...a single imperative...without a connecting link as in Mark and Matthew.”⁴ When Jesus urges him to find life by practicing what he knows to be true (v 28), the irrepressible lawyer requests a definition for “neighbor” (v 29). There then follows the parable of the Good Samaritan, which disallows any boundary-setting definition of neighborliness, since one must be prepared to show mercy even to an enemy in need (vv 30-37).

Their Redactional Setting

Each of these respective emphases regarding scriptural revelation, cult and behavior are in part, at least, expressions of each evangelist’s redactional interests. That Matthew’s lawyer should ask Jesus about the great commandment in the law (v 36) is not surprising. Earlier, this concern to identify the heart of revealed religion appears in Matthew’s formulation of the “Golden Rule” (7:12) and in Jesus’ accusing the religious leaders of neglecting the “...weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith” during their scrupulous efforts to tithe even herbs (23:23). Likewise, Jesus’ response to the lawyer in terms of “law and prophets” (that is, the entire scriptural revelation) reflects the Matthean idiom in his report of Jesus’ mission to fulfill “the law and the prophets” (5:17) rather than abolish them (cf. 7:12). Intriguingly, in the latter instance as well as at 23:23, these efforts to identify the major thrust of Scripture occur within an affirmation of the need to observe the minor points, too (5:18-19).

Mark’s concern to make these commands supersede the cultus fits with his redactional program also. He gives more attention to the debate about ritual cleanliness and dietary scrupulosity at 7:1-23 (esp. v 19) than does Matthew (15:1-20). His account of Jesus’ attitude toward the Temple is also more harsh. Mark alone reports that, in His “cleaning” of the Temple, Jesus in effect closed it down by preventing the flow of traffic (11:16). Only Mark has Jesus citing Isa 56:3-7 to make the point that God had intended to make the shrine a place of prayer for all nations, not merely for
Jews (v 17). Finally, the Second Evangelist makes the false witnesses at the Sanhedrin's hearing attribute a more negative attitude of Jesus toward the shrine. There is no reference to its being the "Temple of God" (cf. Matthew 26:61). Whereas Jesus in Matthew only claims power to destroy it, in Mark He is alleged to have promised to destroy it and build one without human effort (14:58).

Luke's stress upon merciful behavior (10:28, 37) corresponds to his rendering of "Q" material about love for one's enemies in 6:27-36. The Third Evangelist heightens the stress on "doing good" and concludes with the injunction to imitate God's mercy (rather than His perfection, as in Matt 5:43-48).

Finally, one might suggest the following concerns which these modifications would have addressed. Matthew's subordination of the written revelation to these twin commands would have answered questions among his readers about the relation of Jesus' teaching to Jewish scripture and tradition. For Gentile Christians, confused by Jewish Christians who urged them to perfect their faith by dietary and cultic scrupulosity, Mark insisted that love for God and neighbor would keep them near to the Kingdom of God even if the cult were to be terminated by the Temple's destruction. Luke expanded "the neighborhood" to include such undesirables as the Samaritan. Although the stricken Jew's neighbors (the priest and the Levite) failed to show him mercy, the foreigner did. That Jews might mediate salvation to the Gentiles is radical enough; but to have the reverse occur, turns the world upside down. Such opportunities did occur in the early decades when Gentile churches came to the aid of the poor saints of Jerusalem (e.g., 1 Cor 16:1-3).

Thus, one can offer an account, based upon internal evidence, of the synoptic evangelists' renditions of Jesus' teaching about loving God and neighbor. Yet, it might be possible to understand them further in the light of certain "background" data.

III. JUDAISM

Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

That Jesus was not the first to join the commands to love God and neighbor cannot be denied. They appear together in T. Iss. 5:2, 7:6 and T. Dan. 5:3. In no instance, however, are they used to subordinate the Law and cultus; nor do they expand the boundaries of neighborliness in so radical a fashion. Consequently, the Testaments provide no means of accounting for the use which the Gospel writers make of the twin commands. Moreover, the usefulness of this material could be minimized by
any who would suspect Christian interpolations at this point. But such cannot be claimed of the following data.

Pirke ‘Abot 1:2 (3)

A pronouncement attributed to one Simeon the Just stands at the head of Pirke ‘Abot. Although Simeon’s precise identity and date are still debated (ca. 350-200 B.C.E.),7 the statement in question, authentic or not, clearly reflects an outlook possible only while the Second Temple stood:

שמעון התדמך היה משיירין בכסת המלוכה, שבב יהו אום על שלשה דברים התובלו עולם: על התורה, על העבורה, על פעמים טובים.

Simeon the Just was one of the survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say, “on three things the World [or Age] stands: on the Torah, on the [Temple] service, and on deeds of lovingkindness.”9

This formulation by Simeon the Just is so all-embracing that Judah Goldin sees it as comprising the pillars “...fundamental to the architecture of classical Judaism.”10 Yet, they are even broader, for they deal with the fundamentals of religion. R. Herford put the matter precisely and succinctly: “The three things represent revelation, worship and sympathy, i.e., God’s word to man, man’s response to God, and man’s love to his fellow men.”11

The impact of Simeon’s statement was so profound that it dominated thinking for several centuries thereafter. Subsequent sages, while not directly helpful for our interpretation of the Gospels because of their late date, nevertheless show both how fundamental was the hold of Simeon’s dictum (in that it was preserved intact) and how it became adapted to subsequent situations. Goldin12 sees the earliest such adaptation in a tradition about R. Jochanan ben Zakkai which is preserved in ‘Abot R. Nat 4.13 Whether or not the account is early or authentic, a difference in mood with respect to ‘Abot 1:2 (3) is evident in the request R. Jochanan allegedly made of Vespasian following the siege of Jerusalem. He asked only for Jabneh, that he might go “...and teach [his] disciples and there establish a prayer (house) and perform all the commandments.”14 For Goldin, this formulation represents an attempt to deal with the new situation by boldly reinterpreting the pillars of Simeon in the aftermath of
the War of 66–70 C.E. For the Torah, he made central the study and teaching of Torah; as a substitute for Temple worship (now impossible) came prayer, or acts like prayer; for deeds of piety, the Master prescribed acts of lovingkindness.\(^\text{15}\)

In another tradition about R. Jochanan ben Zakkai, likewise preserved in 'Abot R. Nat. (4 in version A, 8 in B), the sage not only makes prayer a substitute for Temple service, he also subordinates it with the third element. On inspecting the ruined Temple, he comforted the distressed R. Joshua by maintaining (on the authority of Hos 6:6) that merciful deeds constitute an equally effective, alternative atonement.\(^\text{16}\) The latter tack is continued by R. Nathan himself. After quoting each of Simeon's dicta (version A), he expounds the meaning of the pillars seriatim. Once again, Hos 6:6 provides the warrants for contending that both the study of Torah and the doing of merciful deeds are superior to burnt offerings.\(^\text{17}\)

Although Simeon's formulation was quoted verbatim through the third century,\(^\text{18}\) an even farther-reaching adaptation occurred in the wake of the disastrous wars of 132-135 C.E. In Pirke 'Abot 1:18 (19), in a formally parallel comment, this tradition is preserved: "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: 'On three things the world stands: on Judgment, and on Truth and on Peace.'"\(^\text{19}\) According to Jacob Neusner, such a statement "...clearly represents a post-135 revision of no. 2: The Torah now is truth, a philosophizing tendency; the Temple service is now replaced by justice; and deeds of lovingkindness are replaced by peace."\(^\text{20}\)

Thus was the legacy of Simeon the Just preserved and adapted after 70 C.E. Hos 6:6 played a prominent part in enabling the first and third of his "pillars" to subordinate the second when momentous historical events required equally decisive theological rethinking. Yet, the stream which we have followed had, if we interpret and apply the data correctly, another tributary; namely, that of other Jews who differed with Simeon about the pillars of religion. And it is to them that we now turn.

IV. 'ABOT AND THE GOSPELS

In the Gospels, although Hos 6:6 is used to subordinate various cultic practices (Matt 9:12, 12:7), it is the conjunction of Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18 that subordinates all three of Simeon's pillars.\(^\text{21}\) He had said that the world (or age to come) stands on the Torah. Jesus declared that both the Law and Prophets themselves "hang" on the twin commands to love God with one's entire being and neighbor as oneself (Matt 22:40). Simeon had maintained that the world stands on the Temple service. An unknown scribe
subordinated “...all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” to the love commands (Mark 12:33), an analysis which Jesus approved by pronouncing him “not far” from the Kingdom of God (v 34). Simeon had opined that the world or age to come stands on acts of loving-kindness. According to Luke, an anonymous lawyer eager to inherit eternal life (or life of the age [to come], Ζῶη αἰὼνιος) himself joined these love commands. In the parable of the Good Samaritan which follows, Jesus urged him to become a neighbor by performing deeds of mercy even to an enemy in need (10:25-37). So, while for Simeon the foundations of existence now and hereafter were the written revelation, its cultic response, and merciful interpersonal behavior, the Evangelists portray Jesus and one guardian-interpreter of Jewish religion as maintaining point-for-point that greater even than these is wholehearted, boundary-transcending love. In other words, my contention is that the Synoptic variants, seen against the backdrop of ‘Abot 1:2 (3), portray debates among Jews wherein there is an effort to lay deeper or other foundations for ways of being religious that those which Simeon the Just had identified. This external evidence suggests that there was an earlier, or at least another, reason for the shape of these commandments than is usually offered. Both kinds of data may enable us to give a richer and fuller account of their significance.

V. IMPLICATIONS

Redaction

Although we argued above that the evangelists’ versions of the love commands fit their overall redactional purposes, one must not suppose that they either reflect an exclusive concern or that they are essentially redactional in nature. There is, in fact, a great deal of overlap. Like Mark, Matthew is inclined to subordinate cultic and ceremonial matters to larger issues. So, he has Jesus invoke Hos 6:6 twice in order to criticize religious leaders for preferring ceremonial purity to showing mercy towards sinners (9:10-12) and for condemning innocents while maintaining cultic scrupulosity (12:1-7).

Likewise, Matthew’s and Mark’s treatment of the encounter between Jesus and the rich man bears a striking resemblance to Luke’s version of the commandments to love. In both instances, the quest is for (1) behavior (2) that will eventuate in eternal life (Matt 19:16, Mark 10:17, Luke 18:18. Cf. Luke 19:25). Both relate Jesus’ directive (3) to behave mercifully (giving to the poor was regarded as a merciful act [Matt 19:21. Cf. 6:2-3, Mark 10:21, Luke 18:22]). However, Matthew takes the matter another
step by appending (4) loving one’s neighbor as oneself to the Decalogue (v 19. Cf. Luke 10:27). Finally, Matthew insists that the disposition towards one’s enemy, of the kind exhibited by the Good Samaritan, mirrors the way in which God loves; and this enables one to fulfill the command to be teleios as He is (5:43-48).22 Thus, the themes are transredactional ones.23

Furthermore, their commonality at this level runs deeper if one looks at the matter from the perspective of source and form criticism. The connections just cited span the triple tradition, Matthew and “L,” and “Q” and “L.” Moreover, they infuse logia, apophthegms (specifically, controversy dialogues) and parable.24 Therefore, both in content and form, the oral and written tradition portrays Jesus as one whose teaching dealt with the pillars of religion as these had been formulated by Simeon the Just and as they were being debated among religious experts of the day.25

History

Having pursued these themes beyond their redactional level to the tradition which lay behind it, it now becomes necessary to press the matter still farther. Does the tradition reflect anything of the mind, if not the very words of Jesus? Perhaps the best entry into this complex matter lies via the extent of post-Easter Christology or soteriology at work.26 One thing seems immediately clear. The accounts have not undergone the sort of thoroughgoing Christianization that would have made Jesus the hero in each case. We recall the strong probability that the two commands had already been associated in one branch of Judaism a century and a half before. This is reflected in Luke, where it is the lawyer, not Jesus, who finds in the love commands the way to eternal life. Jesus simply urges him to act on what he has just discovered. Furthermore, in Mark, the sympathetic scribe, not Jesus, elevated agapē over the cultus. Of course, in Matthew and Mark, Jesus does appear as the first to subordinate the Law (and prophets) to love for God and neighbor. But He emerges as the chief among several participants in a debate occurring among Jews and within Judaism.

Perhaps more significantly, relation to Jesus’ person is not made superior to obeying His teaching here as it is elsewhere in the Gospels. For example, in Matthew 19, the wealthy young man comes to Jesus for instruction about good behavior that will get him a hold on eternal life (v 16). Jesus answers that eschatological entry into life rests on keeping the commands, specifically the last five of the Decalogue, to which He adds Lev 19:18, the command to love neighbor as self (vv 18-19). In response to the inquisitor's
exemplary record of obedience in every respect, and to his sense of incompleteness (ti eti hystero, v 20), Jesus moves him on to perfection with the charge to give his earthly treasures to the poor in exchange for heavenly ones and to follow Him (v 21). None of this occurs in Matthew 22. Nor does it in Luke 10:25-27, in an analogous circumstance, where, as we saw, it is the interlocutor who supplies the answer to his own questions about inheriting eternal life. And Mark resists making Jesus (or allowing himself to) explain why the scribe, having answered so well in subordinating the cult to the love commands, is only near to the kingdom of God (10:33-34).27

Of course, a natural objection will be that such a construct requires a harmonistic gestalt for these three versions: either that Jesus addressed the issues of Scripture, cult and ethics on a single occasion (which the tradition or each evangelist related separately) or that He spoke to each issue at different moments throughout His career. I am not yet prepared to advocate either, nor can I, as an historian, rule out either option a priori. Only a more thoroughgoing study can say. Whatever the ultimate answers, it has perhaps become clearer that future analysis of the synoptic versions of Jesus' teaching about loving God and neighbor ought to consider the shape and significance of Pirke 'Abot 1:2 (3).

Notes


2. Although Strack and Billerbeck have cited 'Abot in connection with Matthew, their use of the statement more nearly fits the Markan version. H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, Das Evangelium mach Mattheus erläutert aus Talmud und Midrasch (Munchen: Beck, 1956), p. 500. Vincent Taylor, referring to the passage for Mark, uses it in a way more appropriate to Matthew: The Gospel According to St. Mark, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1966), p. 487, 489. No one, however, has used the saying to view the three synoptic versions "synoptically" and to account for them more fully thereby. Klaus Berger consults hellenistic and palestinian-Jewish sources in his massive study of these passages; nevertheless he does not cite Pirke 'Abot. See Die Gesetzesauslegung Jesu, WMANT 40/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), p. 56-257.

3. It is not necessary to the argument of this study to determine which of these

4. Fuller, *Essays*, p. 44.

5. See *Jub.* 20:2-10 and *T. Benj.* 3:1-5 where both imperatives occur in the near context. In all of these, only one of the faculties appears: the whole or the true heart (*T. Iss.* 7:6, *T. Dan* 5:3).

6. Fuller, *Essays*, p. 48, is not correct to equate the generalization of *T. Iss.* 7:6 with the gospels’ more far-reaching imperative to love one’s enemy.


9. Of special significance for understanding the terminology of this passage is Judah Goldin’s important study, “The Three Pillars of Simeon the Righteous,” *PAAJIR* 27 (1958): 43-58. He makes a good case for the temporal-eschatological sense of ḥ̄ōlm (“the Age” and even the “future”) as well as the more spatial “world” of “universe.” And he succeeds in arguing that the articular form ḥ̄ōrm is more likely written Torah. The prevailing anarthrous and later usage refers to the wider-ranging tradition, both written and oral, which formed the mainstay of Jewish life and thought (p. 47-50). But he is less successful in making the case for rendering gmūṭ ḥsdālm as “acts of Piety” (in obedience to the written revelation) rather than “deeds of lovingkindness/mercy,” a meaning which he alleges is more appropriate to the situation of Jochanan be Zakkai and his successors and which kl msōt expresses better (p. 43-47). However, while there is no denying that the sage and his “school” were exemplary exponents of merciful deeds, their legacy stemmed more directly from the Master’s citation of Hos 6:6 than from Simeon’s dictum. Acts of lovingkindness, he declared, would qualify as an alternative means of atonement, even though the Temple (the second of Simeon’s pillars) had been destroyed in the war with Rome (see n. 16 below). Furthermore, Goldin’s reference to R. Nathan’s exposition of gmūṭ ḥsdālm is inappropriate on two counts: (1) the opinion of a later sage cannot, without further ado, define usage several centuries earlier, and (2) it is inconclusive—the example of Daniel includes both pious acts towards God and deeds of mercy/lovingkindness towards people. (See notes 13 and 17 below).


12. Goldin, “Pillars,” p. 51. He takes proper notice of the variant expressions in Version B which do not, however, affect the point materially.


15. Ibid., but see n. 9 above, for the rendering of gmilôt hsdím.


17. Goldin, The Fathers, p. 32-35. Daniel exemplified such behavior in that “...he used to outfit the bride and make her rejoice, accompany the dead, give a perutah to the poor, and pray three times a day...” (p. 35). It is otherwise in version B. None of the commentary on Torah and Temple service (found in chap. 5) corresponds to that in A. Furthermore, the exposition of “acts of lovingkindness” is postponed to chap. 8, where these deeds and words of Torah are both regarded (again by virtue of Hos 6:6) as superior to burnt offerings and sacrifices (Saldarini, p. 75).


19. Herford, Ethics, p. 38, whose translation this is, identifies him as the son of Gamliel I who appears to have died shortly before the siege of Jerusalem. Most, with Taylor, Sayings, p. 25, believe him to have been the son of Gamliel II and therefore put the date of his death near or just beyond the middle of the second century. Viviano, Study, p. 30-31, lists the texts which contain the order of the first two elements as they appear above and those in which they are reversed. This detail does not detract from the observation that a substantial revision has occurred.


22. Mark and Luke exhibit fewer such inter-Gospel connections. Both, however, heighten the ultimate significance of the twin commands more that Matthew. In commending the scribe’s subordination of the cult by them, Jesus concludes the scene with the assurance, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (v 34). This comment is the near equivalent of Jesus’ teaching that the doing of these commands will enable one to inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25, 28, 37). Luke’s attitude towards the cult is more difficult to assess at this point. He may have lodged an implied criticism of it in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who became neighbor to the
stricken Jew whom both a priest and Levite bypassed in order to avoid ritual defilement.

23. Ordinarily, redaction criticism says that the Gospel writers are ultimately responsible for the shape of traditions in their works. True enough; but this could come about by allowance of compatible things to stand as much as by adaptation. And the latter could include the exaggeration of what is traditionally and even historically the case. For example, even though Mark (more that other gospel writers) describes Jesus as a didaskalos, we cannot deny that Jesus was, in fact, a teacher. I have argued this and similar points more fully elsewhere: “External Evidence for the Structure and Function of Mark” 4:1-20, 7:14-23 and 8:14-21,” JTS 29/2 (1978): 323-338, esp. pp. 331-338.

24. For convenience, I have simply used the categories popularized by Rudolf Bultmann. While nomenclature may be debatable, the larger point is that numerous forms are impressed with similar teaching. See The History of the Synoptic Tradition, trans. John Marsh, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 16, 49, 51, 79, 178.

25. Such a phenomenon is routinely recognized regarding Jesus’ teaching on divorce. Matthew’s version (19:9) reflects the more liberal position of Shammai, while the other synoptists’ correspond to that of the stricter Hillel (Mark 10:10/Luke 16:17). See Gundry, Matthew, p. 377, where m. Git. 9:10 is cited.


27. Fuller, Essays, p. 47, lends his support to those who claim that “...the preference of the moral law over the sacrificial cult presupposes a Hellenistic-Jewish rather than rabbinic understanding of the law.” A similar point is made by Perkins, Love Commands, p. 23. However, this view ignores the fact that such a “preference” is as Hebraic as Hos 6:6 and as rabbinic as Jochanan b. Zakkai and R. Nathan.