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0521609429 - Wisdom in the Q-tradition: The Aphoristic Teaching of Jesus

Ronald A. Piper

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Few of the recorded sayings of Jesus can have attracted such a wide popular interest and yet such a limited scholarly interest as his aphorisms. These pithy proverbial sayings are found in abundance in the synoptic tradition. Amongst them are sayings such as:

‘The labourer is worthy of his hire’ (Mt 10:10b)

‘The measure you give will be the measure you receive’
(Mt 7:2b)

‘The tree is known by its fruit’ (Mt 12:33b).

Such aphorisms are indeed far more numerous than the parables of Jesus, those figurative sayings with a narrative element. Yet, while the parables have been subjected to intense scholarly study and have been related to the major themes of Jesus’ preaching about God’s kingdom, very few scholars have known quite what to do with the aphoristic sayings. Therefore, as late as 1983, J.D. Crossan could pointedly write in the introduction to his book, *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus*, that ‘while very many books have been written on the parabolic or narrative tradition of Jesus’ sayings, none has ever been written on the non-narrative or aphoristic tradition alone’ (p. viii).

Of course it has long been recognized that sayings of a ‘proverbial’ or ‘aphoristic’ kind are to be found amongst the sayings of Jesus recorded in the synoptic gospels. Early form-critical studies inevitably had to classify and analyse such sayings. M. Dibelius distinguished the ‘gnome’ from the Greek ‘chria’ by indicating that the gnome, unlike the chria, was unconnected with any particular person.¹ However gnomes received little further attention from Dibelius, except to be set in the larger category of apophthegmata.² R. Bultmann, on the other hand, chose to differentiate these gnomonic sayings from the apophthegmata. He considered the gnomonic sayings to be independent units of tradition, not comprising part of a story,

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and he classified them under the general heading of ‘Dominical Sayings’ (*Herrenworte*), and more precisely as ‘Logia (Jesus as Teacher of Wisdom)’.³ The close relationship between these sayings and Oriental wisdom was emphasized, and the sayings were described as

‘proverbs’ in the narrower sense, i.e. words of wisdom, aphorisms such as circulated in Israel and in Judaism and throughout the Orient generally, not only among the people but chiefly among the teachers of wisdom – in Judaism the rabbis.⁴

Bultmann further classified the sayings according to their constitutive forms into ‘Principles’, ‘Exhortations’, ‘Questions’ and ‘Longer Compositions’.⁵ In general, Bultmann’s interest lay more in the tendencies which suggest how these sayings may have been modified in the course of transmission than in the way in which the sayings are used, *viz.* the functions which they serve, in the synoptic tradition.

Subsequent studies of the aphoristic sayings in the synoptic gospels have been rather limited. R. W. Funk noted in 1970 the general lack of form-critical analysis of these sayings, declaring that ‘form critics threw in the sponge on questions of this order’.⁶ Nevertheless some progress has been made in studies by W. Beardslee⁷ and N. Perrin,⁸ who argue that proverbial wisdom had become intensified eschatologically in the gospels; in D. Zeller’s excellent study of wisdom admonitions;⁹ and, recently, in J. Crossan’s attempt to ‘establish a transmissional analysis for each of those 133 sayings’.¹⁰

The reasons for this relative neglect may be several. The vast quantity of the material is certainly a factor. J. Crossan identifies 133 aphorisms in the synoptic gospels;¹¹ C. E. Carlston 102;¹² M. Küchler 108.¹³ When one also considers the variations in form and context within the synoptic gospels, any task of analysis becomes intimidating. In addition, the importance of these sayings has often been open to question. It may well be that they have suffered from the general reaction in NT studies against the nineteenth-century liberal Protestant theories which all too easily put Jesus’ teaching in terms of universal ethical ideals. Bultmann’s own conclusion, that most of these sayings (apart from four specific types) cannot be guaranteed to be authentic sayings of Jesus because they lack anything ‘characteristic, new, reaching out beyond popular wisdom and piety’,¹⁴ must also be a factor.

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Another problem has been posed by the very definition of ‘proverb’. A. Taylor, in his study of the proverb, consciously avoided even offering a definition of ‘proverb’.¹⁵ Other scholars suggest ‘proverb’ should be distinguished from ‘aphorism’.¹⁶ There is also the difficulty of knowing whether a proper distinction can be made between literary and popular proverbs.¹⁷ The very ambiguity of the Hebrew terms *māšāl* and *ḥīdā* and of the Greek terms παραβολή, παροιμία and γνώμη only adds to the confusion.¹⁸

While all of these factors may contribute to the difficulty of analysing aphoristic sayings in the gospels, the task is nonetheless an important one. The sheer quantity of such sayings in the synoptic tradition testifies to its importance. Further, an increasing recognition of other sapiential concepts, such as divine Sophia, in the synoptic tradition¹⁹ makes it all the more pressing that one should develop an understanding of how the various sapiential traditions may be related. It is the desire to make a start towards such an understanding that is the motivation for the present study.

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**APHORISTIC WISDOM AND THE
NEW TESTAMENT ERA***A definition of 'aphoristic saying'*

It is necessary to begin with at least a working definition of the kind of saying in which we are interested, the 'aphoristic saying'. The following considerations will apply.

1. In form, aphoristic sayings are short, pithy sayings, arresting in their succinctness of expression. They may be either a declarative statement or a question. The special class which are imperative in form will be considered 'wisdom admonitions', and these will be more precisely defined in Chapter 3.2. J. M. Thompson notes: 'Beyond this, however, we find the frequent use of rhyme, meter, repetition, alliteration, assonance, simile, and metaphor.'¹ Yet the presence of simile or metaphor does not in itself constitute an aphoristic saying.²
2. Despite their brevity, aphoristic sayings are self-contained and require no specific narrative context. They express thoughts which are general and complete in themselves. Possible fragments of such sayings will receive only slight attention.³
3. Partly because they are self-contained, aphoristic sayings can be applied to a variety of contexts and situations. The degree of openness may vary and may be related to the extent of metaphorical imagery which exists for a given saying, but it is questionable how far this may be quantified. It does not seem helpful therefore to distinguish between proverbs and 'non-proverbial wisdom sentences' on the basis of degree of hermeneutical openness.⁴ But aphoristic sayings will not be restricted primarily to a single specific setting or situation.
4. The observations set forth in aphoristic sayings are in fact mostly presented as true to the realm of the collective experience of man in this world. Of course, as J. M. Thompson

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observes, they ‘do not emerge full-blown out of the collective mouth of “the people”’,⁵ but they are expressed as though they are true to aspects of general experience. They are communicated in language which is vividly concrete and grounded in this world.

5. Accordingly, aphoristic sayings are most frequently expressed in impersonal terms, since they are ostensibly not limited to a particular situation or context.⁶ Frequently they are expressed in the third person, although a generalized use of the second or even first person is possible (cf. Lk 11:23). Because they are true to aspects of the collective experience of man, and because they are phrased as generalizations, aphoristic sayings possess a universality which powerfully promotes the acceptance of their truthfulness.

Not included in the considerations above are judgements either concerning the actual popular usage of the sayings or concerning the presence or absence of didactic intent in such sayings. Evidence of wide or popular usage may help to confirm that a saying is aphoristic in accordance with the suggested criteria above, but the absence of such evidence should not be used to deny the possibility of a saying meeting these criteria. The judgement to be made is primarily one of form and content rather than origin or usage. Evidence for origin or earlier usage is difficult to obtain in any case, and Bultmann may be correct in assigning the circulation in Israel of most aphoristic sayings to teachers rather than to the populace.⁷ This type of circulation is especially likely for collections of sayings.

How far an aphoristic saying may be didactic has frequently been a point of debate. H. -J. Hermisson defined the proverb (*Sprichwort*) as a saying which must draw a conclusion out of the sum of experience without giving advice as to what one should do. On this basis, he discovered relatively few *Sprichwörter* in the Book of Proverbs, and classified most sayings instead as ‘didactic maxims’ (*die lehrhaften Sprüche*) or wisdom admonitions.⁸ While there is a clear formal differentiation between indicative and imperative sayings of the aphoristic kind, there are serious difficulties in a clear distinction between proverbs and didactic maxims. It is not primarily a matter of form and content that results in a statement being didactic, but rather that statement’s use or application. Metaphorical sayings are especially open to a wide range of uses, and it is conceivable that a given saying, such as ‘The tree is known by its fruit’ (Mt 12:33),

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could in one context be a conclusion from experience and in another context set forth advice as to how one should act. The suitability for didactic use of a saying, therefore, is hardly to be used for determining whether a saying is 'aphoristic', or even for distinguishing between types of aphoristic statement.⁹

The development of aphoristic traditions

Aphoristic sayings could be used by anyone, but they also comprised part of a wider tradition known as 'wisdom'. The concept of 'wisdom' is a broad one, however, and it is itself not easy to define.

In OT research, some attempts have been made to define 'wisdom' in terms of the 'intellectual tradition' of Israel,¹⁰ but the danger of such a definition is to make the concept of wisdom so intangible as to be of very limited usefulness.¹¹ Thus it has been argued that it is necessary to introduce narrower distinctions with respect to the term. J. L. Crenshaw¹² has suggested that a distinction must be made between wisdom literature, wisdom traditions (the educational curriculum and pedagogy of the 'wisdom movement' itself) and wisdom thinking (its particular approach to reality). Following the conclusions of H. H. Schmid,¹³ Crenshaw suggests even that forms of speech traditionally found in wisdom literature do not necessarily always indicate or constitute wisdom thinking. What in fact does constitute wisdom thinking is less clear, but Crenshaw ventures to define 'wisdom' (wisdom thinking?) as 'the quest for self-understanding in terms of relationships with things, people, and the Creator'. This search moves on three levels: (1) nature wisdom; (2) juridical and practical wisdom (*Erfahrungswisheit*), including attention to human relationships in an ordered society or state; and (3) theological wisdom, affirming God as ultimate meaning and grappling with the question of theodicy. He further indicates at least four *Sitze im Leben* for this search: the family/clan (with the goal of mastering life), the court (with the goal of educating a select group), the scribes (with the goal of dogmatic-religious education for all), and the self-critical sages (such as Job and Qoheleth).¹⁴

This attempt to describe the types and limits of wisdom represents a useful counter-balance to the broad general definitions. The classifications which Crenshaw presents may indeed be useful, but even they cannot be considered exhaustive. In the intertestamental period one encounters a cosmological, apocalyptic variety of 'wisdom' expression, such as the revelations to the seer in 1 Enoch, which is not to be identified with the nature wisdom of 1 Ki 4:29–34 or the

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earlier 'theological wisdom'.¹⁵ Further, in the intertestamental and early Christian periods, other *Sitze im Leben* may have to be sought for the exercise of sapiential thinking than those which Crenshaw enumerates.¹⁶

The main interest of the present study will be in aphoristic traditions, characteristic of 'experiential wisdom'. But a particular problem arises in this respect. How can one distinguish the occasional use of a popular proverb, by virtually anyone, from evidence of more conscious 'sapiential thinking'? Surely this is when *collections* of aphorisms become significant. The collection of aphoristic sayings is an important indication of a more deliberate sapiential interest. In such collections one has to reckon not only with popular proverbs but also with the possibility of aphorisms coined in literary circles.

This recognition has been forcefully presented by H.-J. Hermisson. He has emphasized the role of the wisdom school (in ancient Israel associated with the training of state officials) for both the composition and the collection of most of the aphorisms found in Proverbs.¹⁷ Hermisson admits that in fact it is difficult to devise criteria to differentiate clearly between those individual proverbs owing their origin to folk circles and those composed by 'wise men';¹⁸ but, whatever the origin and usage of isolated proverbs, the compilation into written collections of such sayings clearly owed much to the 'wise men' of Israel. By the time of Sirach, collecting maxims was certainly part of the task of the wise man. The preservation of aphorisms (39:1), investigation of their hidden meaning and intent (39:2–3, 3:29, 13:26), study of maxims of the 'learned' (8:8, 47:14–17) and the correct use of aphorisms in speech (18:24; 20:20; cf. Prov 26:7) are all attested in Sirach.

The collection of aphoristic sayings was not limited in Jewish tradition to Proverbs, Sirach and Qoheleth.¹⁹ M. Küchler traces several further examples of such *logoi sophōn*, including Philo, *Hypothetica* 7:1–9; Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2:190–219; the Mishnah tractate *Aboth* 1:1–15; 2:4b–7, 8–14; Pseudo-Phocylides and Pseudo-Menander. From the early Christian tradition, Küchler adds Q; PapOxy 1, 654, 655; James; the Gospel of Thomas; the Sentences of Sextus; and the Teaching of Silvanus.²⁰ It will not be possible in the present study to trace this large field of literature, but three observations may be briefly made.

Firstly, while interest in the collection of aphoristic sayings persisted over several centuries in Jewish and Christian circles, as well as in Greco-Roman education, the nature of these collections was

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subject to change and to contact with other varied theological and sapiential concepts. For example, it has been noted how the arrangement of maxims in Sirach is more thematic and integrated than in Prov 10ff.²¹ Further, while both Sirach and Proverbs contain traditions about divine Wisdom in addition to aphoristic sayings, the reflection on divine Wisdom in Sirach goes beyond that of Prov 1–9 (and Job 28) in the association, but probably not yet complete identification, of divine Wisdom with the Torah (cf. Sir 24).²² The precise reasons for such developments are much debated,²³ but the aphoristic wisdom was clearly not divorced from other theological and sapiential influences, despite its seemingly profane character.

Secondly, it is nonetheless striking that the collections of aphoristic sayings listed by Küchler tend not to be associated with apocalyptic literature or even with works dominated by strongly eschatological motifs, despite the presence of other sapiential concepts in such works.²⁴ Sirach, for example, continues to work largely within a framework of this-worldly existence, even despite the prophetic tone which at times emerges.²⁵ R. Otto did suggest that in 1 En 94–105 and in 2 Enoch many of the exhortations are ‘wisdom exhortations’, which also he claimed to have parallels in the teaching of Jesus. But Otto himself admitted that the aphoristic forms characteristic of experiential wisdom are largely lacking in 1 Enoch. It is the polemical form of the ‘woe’ and the consolatory form of beatitude, both of which are more appropriate for a message characterized by eschatological crisis, that predominates among the ‘wisdom exhortations’.²⁶ In a detailed study of 1 En 92–105, G.W.E. Nickelsburg²⁷ acknowledges that the woe is the most dominant form in these chapters, and he considers the use of the woe here to be more indebted to prophetic traditions than to wisdom.²⁸ The ethical admonition which exists in these chapters is an encouragement to persevere with good deeds in light of the coming days of destruction for all sinners and oppressors (cf. 1 En 94:1, 6–11; 96:1–2; 97:1; 101:1ff.).²⁹ Experiential wisdom had little place, and there is hardly a single saying which might be classified as a ‘proverb’ or ‘aphorism’ in these chapters of 1 Enoch.³⁰

These observations for 1 Enoch can be extended further. In the documents produced by the Qumran community, there is also little evidence of collections of aphorisms or of experiential wisdom such as is found in Proverbs, Qoheleth and Sirach. The concept of ‘wisdom’ was treated more often at Qumran in relation to mysteries made known to the elect by special divine revelation and

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inspiration.³¹ This wisdom was not only related to eschatological secrets, but to a right understanding of the Torah and of the works of God.³² Yet the Qumran community did preserve a few examples of earlier experiential wisdom, such as fragments of Sirach and Qoheleth.³³ Sapiential works of a still different character may include, among others, 11QPs^a18, 4Q184 (the Wiles of the Wicked Woman)³⁴ and 4Q185. 'Wisdom' as a theme does find a significant place in the community, but the presence of aphoristic sapiential traditions is quite limited, and even the preservation of previous Jewish wisdom literature comprises a relatively small proportion of the Qumran texts that have been published thus far.

Even the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs provide little in the way of collections of aphoristic sayings. Proverbial statements can occasionally be isolated,³⁵ but they are seldom found in even small clusters. As Hollander observes, the parenesis in the Testaments 'is not just a collection of sayings and maxims, but clearly a parenetic composition'.³⁶ For example, in TDan a vice (anger) is chosen, then elaborated to show how it psychologically works within man and how it can be related to other vices, and finally followed by reference in general terms to the commandment of God.³⁷ Thus little can be found from 1 Enoch, Qumran or the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs to add significantly to KÜchler's list of collections of aphoristic sayings or to challenge the observed tendency for such collections to be relatively free of domination by strongly eschatological motifs.

Thirdly, the class responsible for the propagation of aphoristic wisdom is shrouded in darkness in the early Christian era. Direct evidence during this period for the general existence of 'wisdom schools' in Palestine is lacking.³⁸ The existence of 'schools' of disciples around pre-rabbinic Pharisaic leaders such as Hillel and Shammai is likely, but how far these would be considered to have been based on the study of sapiential concepts is open to question. D. Georgi has argued that there were in fact such schools, the objective of which was to train pupils for the role of 'wise men'. The Jewish Scriptures were a major treasure of wisdom for these men, especially of moral wisdom, but the importance of experiential wisdom was never completely undermined. Georgi argued that these schools were modelled upon the Hellenistic philosophical schools and that they were not so concerned with legal casuistry as with popular religion. Paul is alleged to have been trained in just this sort of school, and he accordingly provides some of the earliest literary evidence for the

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encounter of 'wisdom school' and Pharisaism. Similarly, it is alleged that the Hillel-tradition also represents Hillel as this union of the truly wise and truly godly man.³⁹

Georgi's main evidence for this last contention is the collection of Hillel sayings in Mishnah *Aboth*, but he therefore finds it necessary to differ with J. Neusner's argument that the Hillel collection in Mishnah *Aboth* (2:5ff.) is late.⁴⁰ Neusner's careful study of early rabbinic Pharisaism shows that there is little actual evidence of sapiential sayings preserved from the period before AD 70. The parallelism, artful contrasts, rhythm and formal unity of proverbial sentences are not reproduced in the moral sayings attributable to early Pharisees.⁴¹ While it is not possible to deny Georgi's conjecture about the existence of Jewish 'wisdom schools' in Palestine, it is at least clear from Neusner's findings that little has been preserved from such schools that shows much formal affinity with the previously attested genre of aphoristic wisdom. Even where correspondences can be identified (cf. *M. Aboth* 1:1–18) they pertain to a very small proportion of material. Paul, one of Georgi's examples of a Pharisee trained in such a wisdom school, does indeed show some interest in a variety of aspects of identifiable wisdom thought. The speculative types of wisdom, possibly related to the problem of gnosis at Corinth and to concepts parallel to Hellenistic philosophy, have drawn most attention in studies of Paul and wisdom.⁴² But of course here one is referring to a very different kind of wisdom from the moral wisdom found in Georgi's other example, Hillel. Pauline correspondences with Jewish moral and experiential wisdom are not lacking, but a clearer definition of the various sapiential influences in Paul's writings may need to be set forth before specific origins can be assigned to them.⁴³

The theory of the existence of 'Jewish wisdom schools' also suffers from the difficulty of finding evidence for a distinct system of Jewish education at all in the first century AD. Any Jewish schools might have confined themselves to instruction in the law and religious duty, leaving other necessary forms of knowledge to a Greco-Roman educational system in Palestine.⁴⁴ The impact of Greco-Roman rhetoric on Tannaitic rabbinic literature has been argued by H. A. Fischel.⁴⁵ The use of proverbs and moral sayings is itself an element in such rhetoric, and Fischel observes that 'the skillful employment of the proverb is recommended by Aristotle, whose view is followed for centuries in the Greco-Roman *rhetorica*, handbooks, *progymnasmata*, and literary tracts on style and grammar, including Christian works'.⁴⁶ From the fourth century BC onwards, many collections of poetic