The Early Christian Prayer Circle: Sidebar, Coptic Liturgical Text

Hugh Nibley (commentary on L. Saint-Paul Girard’s modern edition)


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This text, from a Christian “Book of Breathings,” highlights the importance of the prayer circle in early Christian worship.
COPTIC LITURGICAL TEXT

I.

Notes to “The Early Christian Prayer Circle”


7. Rahmani, Testamentum Domini Nostri, 38, 40–42.

8. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechesis XX, Mystagogica II, de Baptismi Caeremoniis (Catechetical Lecture on the Rites of Baptism), in Patrologiae Graecae (hereafter PG) 33:1081; also in Hugh Nibley, The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005), 520.


Commentary for this sidebar begins on page 90.
17. The Son uttered on the cross, namely:

Eloi, Eloi, A-

18. hlebaks atōnē²⁷ That is to say, God, my God, why (djou) hast thou forsaken me?

F. The hymn

19. Holy, Holy, Holy! Hail David the father (ancestor)

20. of Christ! He who sings praises (psalms) in the Church of the First-born (pl.) of heaven, Hail

21. David, theopa [tor?] (ancestor of the Lord), of the joyful ten-stringed lyre¹⁸ who sings

22. within (the veil of) the altar¹⁹

23. the joyful one (either David or the altar). Hail Hormiosiel, who sings within the veil

G. Prayer circle

24. of the Father²⁰ They repeat after him, those who are at the entrances (gates, doors) and those who are upon the towers (i.e., the watchmen at the gates). And when they hear what he says, namely the tribes (or gates?) who

25. are within the Twelve Worlds, they joyfully

26. repeat it after him;²¹ Holy, Holy, One (or Jesus) Holy Father.²² Amen,

27. Amen, Amen. Hail Arebrais in heaven and earth!

28. Amen, Amen. Hail Arebrais in heaven and earth!

29. Then you (pl.) bless (praise God, pray), KOK (meaning that at this point certain actions are performed). Hail O Sun! hail ye twelve little children

30. who overshadow (protect?) the body of the Sun!²³ Hail ye twelve phials

31. filled with water. They have filled their hands, they have scattered abroad

32. the rays of the Sun, lest they burn up the fruits

33. of the field.²⁴ Fill thy hands, pronounce blessing upon this

34. cup. KOK [another ordinance]

H. Entering the Presence

Hail ye four winds of heaven!

35. Hail ye four corners of the earth! (the inhabited earth, oikoumenē)²⁵

36. Hail ye hosts (stratia) of heaven (i.e., the stars) Hail

37. thou earth (land) of the inheritance

38. Hail O garden (or power, authority) of the Holy Ones (saints)

39. [of] the Father²⁶ One holy Father

40. Holy [Son] Holy Ghost

41. Amen.

Commentary to “Coptic Liturgical Text”


18. ²⁷ Jeu 54 (40), text in Carl Schmidt, Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache aus dem Codex Bruccianus (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1892); ²⁸ Cf. German trans., 193.

19. ²⁷ Jeu 66–67 (53g), in Schmidt, Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache, 114–17, quotation from p. 114; cf. trans., 204. Both ¹ and ² Jeu contain sketches showing various arrangements of prayer circles. Other texts, e.g., the Gospel of Bartholomew and Pistis Sophia, p. 358, make it clear that the facing in four directions denotes standing in a circle.

20. Kasr al-Wazz fragment, p. ii–end, from photographs kindly lent to the author by Professor G. A. Hughes at the University of Chicago at the time of their discovery in 1966.

21. Pulver, “Jesus’ Round Dance and Crucifixion,” 186, notes that mourning here denotes that the initiate is expected to suffer after the manner of the leader. The word for “mourn” in Matthew 11:17 is kōptomai, literally, to inflict wounds sometimes . . . antiphonally . . . Then . . . they mix and both together become a single choir, a copy of the choir set up of old beside the Red Sea.” This is the way Augustine and Chrysostom describe the Sabbath dancing of the Jews (see preceding note), but Philo being himself a Jew found nothing shocking in it.


28. Philo, On the Contemplative Life xi. The passage as rendered by F. H. Colson in the Loeb Classical Library edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), Philo series, 9:165–69; reads: “After the supper . . . they rise up all together and standing in the middle of the refectory [cf. Qumran!] form themselves first into two choirs [choroi, circles], one of men and one of women, the leader and precentor [exarchos] . . . being the most honored amongst them. . . . Then they sing hymns to God . . . sometimes chanting together, sometimes . . . antiphonally . . . Then . . . they mix and both together become a single choir, a copy of the choir set up of old beside the Red Sea.” This is the way Augustine and Chrysostom describe the Sabbath dancing of the Jews (see preceding note), but Philo being himself a Jew found nothing shocking in it.


30. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Caeremoniis Aulae Byz-
2. The earliest signs of the cross were formed by a Greek chi (Ϛ) with the vertical shaft of a Greek rho (ϛ) or iota (ϛ) through the middle, or by a rho with a horizontal bar below the loop. They were interchangeable and are found in varying combinations, being closely associated also with the “Crux Ansata,” the famous Egyptian ankh or life symbol: ⲟ. For many examples, see Henri Leclercq, “Chrisme,” in DACL 3:1481–534. The classic Latin cross does not appear in the West until the fourth century and like the others seems to have come from Egypt, Leclercq, “Chrisme,” 1485–89, and Leclercq is puzzled “that the Christians adopted a sign which ran a serious risk of being misunderstood,” ibid., 1483. Not to worry: these symbols had conveyed for centuries the very ideas which the Christians wished them to represent in a new context, just as they borrowed current alphabets and other symbols of general acceptance to convey their own peculiar ideas. The symbol prefacing this note is both the monogram of Christ and the earliest symbol of the crucifixion; as such, it also designates the victory of light over darkness as represented in the performance of the mysteries.


4. Girard alters eb-ti phonē nenankelōs (“who gives a voice to the angels”) to ef ἀντίφωνην ἐνανκέλως, “whose voice replies to the angels,” because he cannot imagine the meaning of the former. Girard, “Fragment de liturgie,” 66 n. 2. The first suggests the creation hymn, the second the exchange of expressions at the conclusion of the rites (lines 24–27 below).


32. Philo, De Opificio Mundi (On the Creation) 70–71, trans. Colson (as cited in Leisegang, “The Mystery of the Serpent,” 234), modified; see Hugh Nibley, “The Ascension Dramas, in One Eternal Round (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2010), 402, fig. 50A.


34. IQS 8:12–16.

35. See above, notes 20 and 21.


41. Pulver, “Jesus’ Round Dance and Crucifixion,” 175.


44. 1 Jew, in Schmidt, Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache, 326, 370.


50. Henri Leclercq, “Main,” in DACL 1:415. Since the names El, Adonai, Eloi, and Abrasax invoked together at the opening of the rites are all designations of the supreme God, Bathuriel, as second on the list, must be another epithet for El. Şur is properly a stone and a foundation; coming at the beginning of the rites it strongly suggests the Stone of Truth in the Egyptian initiation rites and the eben shetiyah of Hebrew tradition. Nibely, Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 190–202.


53. Friedrich Preisigke, Vom göttlichen Fluidum nach ägyptischer Anschauung (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1920), 41 n. 3; 42.


55. 1 Enoch 65:2.

56. See above, note 17.
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7. Iao is the common equivalent for Jehovah and God. Mizrael is the angelic embodiment of divine author-

6. Mizrael is the angelic embodiment of divine authority, which enables him to see behind the veil. Girard, “Fragment de liturgie,” 66 n. 5, cit. Schwab, Vocabulaire de l’angelologie.

7. Iao is the common equivalent for Jehovah and God. Leclercq, “Abrasax,” 147, 141.

8. KHOK occurs in lines 29 and 32 as KOK. It introduces a new phase or change of scene and indicates that at this point certain actions take place. Our text, in the manner of a prompting sheet, contains only words recited, without describing acts or rites

performed but only the point at which they take place. The Coptic word KOK is the common word for “disrobe” and related concepts, and may indicate changes in costume.

9. Ti-ōrk erō-tn, the erō- indicating “the person adjured,” here in the plural, while the n- is the thing sworn by; see W. F. Crum, Coptic Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 529. To adjure is to place another under solemn obligation by entering a cov-

enant with him.

10. Tōōbe e- as here means to set a mark or stamp upon, to impress upon, to leave a mark on. For vitals the original has t-tcót, meaning size, age, form, which Girard emends to tôlót, meaning “Kidney, also other internal organs” (possibly from the root tôlôdj, bend, be interlaced). It is the Hebrew kliyot, “the reins, kidneys, inward parts.” Crum, Coptic Dictionary, 813.

12. P-hēt, heart mind, thought reason; cf. the Greek, stéthos, the breast as the receptacle of principles of thought, and Hebrew lēb, the heart “as the seat of the various feelings, affections and emotions . . . and of the moral sentiments.” Benjamin Davies, ed., A Compendious and Complete Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament (Boston: Bradley, 1875), 315.
13. The verb for covenant is here sh(e)p tōrē, vb. intr., “grasp the hand, be surety for, undertake”; Crum, Coptic Dictionary, 425; with the object mmof (as here) it means “be surety for.” Hn n-tčidj m-pēfōt Girard renders “entre les mains de son Pere,” i.e., “in his embrace.”

14. Tahof erat.f can mean either “set up,” “establish,” “cause to stand,” or “meet with,” “reach another.”

15. The Coptic word pītes Girard reads as Greek πῆθος, vessel, though he finds the idea “bizarre.” Early Christian and Jewish writers, however, speak of the living body (which is the subject of this passage) as a vessel (ἀγγείον). Barnabas calls the living body “the blessed vessel” (to kalon skeusos), Barnabas, Epistola Catholica (Catholic Epistle) 21, in PG 2:727–82. On the other hand, pīthos is an alternative spelling for πείθος, a Greek equivalent for πιθανός, “obedient,” “receptive,” a fit epithet for an initiate.

16. Girard makes no attempt to translate sousa, but since this is a cry for help, one thinks of the Greek imperative σῶσε (mid. σῴζου, aorist σῶσον) or aorist mid. σῶσαι, meaning “to rescue.” Some maintain that the name of Abrasax is derived from Habros and Sao, “gentle Savior” or “le magnifique sauveur.” Leclercq, “Abrasax,” 129.

17. Is the unfamiliar Aramaic the subject of mystic speculation or just confusion? Girard restores it to elemabakānī. The trouble seems to be the scribe’s insistence on reading the last three syllables as the familiar Ādōnāi (atōnē).

18. Girard alters thea to theo and borrows the pat- from the next word to get theopatōr, “l’ancêtre du Christ,” an epithet of David in Byzantine liturgy. Pa.ti. tēittharašē is divided into [pa]-tī-kithara [nn] rašē tamēt nkap, the harp of joy of ten strings. The ten-stringed harp is a cosmic concept, ten being the perfect number of the Pythagoreans.


20. Harmosiel is the exalted angel who sounds the trumpet and shares with Mizrael the privilege of beholding the Lord behind the veil. The Priscillianists were accused of worshipping him.


22. Is per hakios for the Greek formula Heis Pater Hagios, though Is is the common writing for Jesus, and such an identity is monophysite, making Jesus identical with the Father. As it is, Girard must insert another hagios to make a proper trishagion.


104. Leisegang, “Mystery of the Serpent,” 244.


“minor servants,” the reference to the little children in our prayer circle situation recommends the former. Also, the preposition *mmof* would justify “screen from him the body of the Sun.” Walter Till, *Koptische Grammatik* (Leipzig: VEB Verlag Enzyklopädie, 1970), #258. See the following note.

24. The twelve water jugs and reference to the watering of vegetation recall the peculiar arrangements of the prayer circles in J and 2 *Ie*u. According to *Pistis Sophia*, p. 84, the earth must be shielded from the rays of the sun by veils or curtains lest all life be consumed. Today, the filtering of the sun’s rays by layers of atmosphere of various particles is held to be essential to sorting out life-giving rays from deadly ones and thus making vegetation and other life possible upon the earth.

25. The imagery of the closing passage belongs to the coronation rites. The four corners of the earth motif is basic; see Hugh W. Nibley, “Facsimile 1: By the Figures,” in *An Approach to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2009), 296–313. Paulinus of Nola associated the coronation and universal rule with the types of crosses discussed above, note 1; *Poema* (Poem) 19.638–41, in PL 61:546; a teaching confirmed by Ambrose and Jerome.

26. *P-töm* means either garden or authority; both are appropriate, the garden as the sanctified inheritance of the Saints, the authority being that with which the exalted “Holy Ones of the Father” are invested. The original text, however, has *p-töm*, which also makes sense, since it means “summertime,” i.e., the “Summertime of the Just” when the Saints receive their celestial inheritance, e.g., the Shepherd of Hermas.


125. Plutarch, *De Defectu Oraculorum* 22.

126. I.e., the so-called Pyramidologists. A hypcephalus like that of Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham depicts the geography of Egypt as a reflection of that heaven, with the Delta represented by its nome standards; see Hugh Nibley, *One Eternal Round* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2010), 196, fig. 17.


156. IQS 10.

157. Another veil was found by Stein, sloppily executed by an artist to whom the details were a puzzle. His constellations are unrecognizable save for the Great Bear, which is identical on both veils. Stein, *Innermost Asia* 2:708.

158. This is made perfectly clear in Odeberg, *3 Enoch*, chs. 10 and 12.


160. See above, notes 5 and 6.


163. Fernand Cabrol, “*Diptyques* (Liturgie),” in DACL 4:1050.


165. Cabrol, “*Diptyques*,” 1046–47; Stegmüller, “*Diptychon*,” 1140.