The Early Christian Prayer Circle: Coptic Liturgical Text

Hugh Nibley
The Early Christian Prayer Circle: Sidebar, Coptic Liturgical Text

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


1948-7487 (print), 2167-7565 (online)

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

n the Cairo Museum, written on a huge shard of red pottery, is an ancient Coptic liturgical text which provides a remarkable link between ancient Egyptian and early Christian beliefs. It is a Christian “Book of Breathings” with the name of Osiris (representing the initiate) replaced by that of Adam, as if the “Egyptian Endowment” were organically linked to the Christian. Equally instructive is the predominance of the prayer circle in the text and the cosmic significance given it. As its modern editor, L. Saint-Paul Girard, notes, it has eight main divisions.1


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.


17. 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.

Notes to “The Early Christian Prayer Circle”

A. Calling upon God

Line 1. (The Tau-Rho sign).2

Hail El! Fathouriel,3 who giveth

2. strength (comfort?), who gives replies [antiphonai] to the angels!4

3. Hail Adonai (My Lord), Hail Eloi (My God), Hail

4. Abrasax! Hail Iothael!5 Hail

5. Mistrael (for Mizrael) who has looked upon the face of the Father6

6. in the power of Iao! 7 KHOK.8

B. Solemn adjurations; Adam as the type of initiate

I adjure you (i.e., put you under covenant).9

Commentary for this sidebar begins on page 90.

COPTIC LITURGICAL TEXT

7. by the first seal placed upon the body of Adam. I adjure you (a different word: “give the hand to,” “make to swear”)10 by the second

9. [seal] which is upon the members of Adam. I covenant with you

10. by the third seal which marked the vitals (bowels)11

11. and also the breast (heart, mind)12 of Adam, when he was brought low (cast down) to become dust (earth)

C. The healing of the man Adam

12. until Jesus Christ stands bail for him (lit. takes him by the hand) in the embrace

13. of his Father.13 The Father hath raised him up (or met him).14

D. The breathing (resurrection) motif

He hath breathed in

14. his face and filled him with the breath of life. Send to me

15. thy breath of life, (even) to this true and faithful one (or, to this vessel).15 Amen, amen, amen!

E. A type of the crucifixion

16. Sousa, sousa, sousa!16 I covenant with you by the three cries (of distress) which
17. The Son uttered on the cross, namely:
Eloi, Eloi, A-
18. hlebaks atōnē
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 lyre who sings within (the veil of) the altar
22. the joyful one (either David or the altar). Hail Hormiosiel, who sings within the veil
G. Prayer circle
23. of the Father! They repeat after him, those who are at the entrances (gates, 24. 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: Holy, Holy, One (or Jesus) Holy Father. Amen,
27. Amen, Amen. Hail Arebrais in heaven and earth!
28. 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
29. who overshadow (protect?) the body of the Sun! Hail ye twelve phials
30. filled with water. They have filled their hands, they have scattered abroad
31. the rays of the Sun, lest they burn up the fruits
32. of the field. Fill thy hands, pronounce blessing upon this
33. cup. KOK [another ordinance]
H. Entering the Presence
34. Hail ye four winds of heaven!
35. Hail ye four corners of the earth! (the inhabited earth, oikoumenē)
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 Father! One holy Father
40. Holy [Son] Holy Ghost
41. Amen.

Commentary to “Coptic Liturgical Text”

19. 2 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 koptomai, literally, to inflict wounds in Matthew 11:17 is koptomai, literally, to inflict wounds
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 ( CONSTANTS Chi ) with the vertical shaft of a Greek rho ( CONSTANTS Rho ) or iota ( CONSTANTS Iota ) 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: †. 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 [an]tiphonei nenangelos, “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).


33. 1QS 8:12–16.

34. See above, notes 20 and 21.

35. Acts of John 88, in NTA 2:225; Apocryphon of John, in NTA 1:322; cf. the Life of John according to Serapion, in NTA 1:415; Pistis Sophia, p. 77 (Schmidt), in ANT, 66.


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


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


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


55. 1 Enoch 65:2.

56. See above, note 17.
KOK occurs in lines 29 and 32 as KOK. It intro-
7. Iao is the common equivalent for Jehovah and God.
6. Mizrael is the angelic embodiment of divine author-
3. Recognitiones Clementinae (Clementine Recognitions) 1.32–

8. KHOK occurs in lines 29 and 32 as KOK. It intro-
7. Iao is the common equivalent for Jehovah and God.
6. Mizrael is the angelic embodiment of divine author-
3. Recognitiones Clementinae (Clementine Recognitions) 1.32–

9. Ti-örk erō-tn, the erō- indicating “the person
adjudged,” 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-

60. Rahmani, Testamentum Domini Nostri, 40, 44; cf. Nibley,
Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 520–21.
64. Recognitiones Clementinae (Clementine Recognitions) 1.32–
65. Apocalypse of Abraham 12; cf. OTP 1:695.
66. Robert A. Kraft, The Testament of Job according to the SV
Text (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1974), 3–111 on the various
texts. Part of the Greek version is also reproduced by F. C.
Conybeare, “The Testament of Job and the Testaments of the
XI Patriarchs,” Jewish Quarterly Review 13 (October 1901):
111–13.
70. Testament of Job 47:3.
73. Testament of Job 47:10–11.
74. Testament of Job 47:11–12.
75. Testament of Job 47:12.
The verb for covenant is here sh(e)p tōre, 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-tčijd m-pēfiōt* 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 *piles* Girard reads as Greek *pithos*, 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 (*angeion*), Barnabas calls the living body “the blessed vessel” (to *kalon skeus*), Barnabas, *Epistola Catholica* (Catholic Epistle) 21, in *PG* 2:727–82. On the other hand, *pithos* is an alternative spelling for *pithanos*, a Greek equivalent for *pitanus*, “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 *sōze* (mid. *sōzou*, aorist *sōson*) or aorist mid. *sōsai*, 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 *elema sabaktani*. The trouble seems to be the scribe’s insistence on reading the last three syllables as the familiar *Adonai* (atōnē).

18. Girard alters *thea* to *theo* and borrows the *pat*- from the next word to get *theopator*, “l’ancêtre du Christ,” an epithet of David in Byzantine liturgy. *Pa.ti. tēittharašē* is divided into *[pa] ti-kithara [nn] raše 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*.

23. Girard: “Salut, o douze petits enfants qui protegez le corps du soleil.” Though this can also be read...
“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 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.

25. P-tōm 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-šom, 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 hypocephalus 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.

127. Clement of Alexandria (dubia), Excerpta ex Scriptis Theodoti (The Teachings of Theodotus) 80, in PG 9:696.

128. Second Coptic Gnostic Work, 8a, in Schmidt, Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache, 231–32.

129. Pistis Sophia, 10–11.


133. Odes of Solomon 5 and 6.

134. Pistis Sophia, 10–11.


142. Enuma Elish 6:113. It is the circle of time divided into twelve lunar positions, 5–4, 9–14.


146. Odeberg, 3 Enoch, 3–4; cf. OTP 1:255.


149. Odeberg, 3 Enoch, ch. 1, p. 28.


155. Haus Bonnet, Realexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1952), 700; see Nibley, "Rediscovery of the Apocrypha," in Temple and Cosmos, 229, fig. 46.

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.


