The Early Christian Prayer Circle: Coptic Liturgical Text

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

A. Calling upon God
   Line 1. (The Tau-Rho sign).2
   Hail El! Fatbourel,3 who giveth
   2. strength (comfort?), who gives replies [antiphonei] 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.

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.
17. The Son uttered on the cross, namely:

Eloi, Eloi, A-
18. hlebaks atōnē\textsuperscript{17} 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, 
21. David, theopa [tor?] (ancestor of the Lord), of the joyful ten-stringed lyre\textsuperscript{18} who sings 
22. within (the veil of) the altar\textsuperscript{19} 
23. the joyful one (either David or the altar). Hail Hormiosiel, who sings within the veil 

G. Prayer circle
24. of the Father!\textsuperscript{20} They repeat after him, those who are at the entrances (gates, 
25. doors) and those who are upon the towers (i.e., the watchmen at the gates). And when they 
26. are within the Twelve Worlds, they joyfully 
27. repeat it after him;\textsuperscript{21} Holy, Holy, One (or Jesus) Holy Father.\textsuperscript{22} Amen, 
28. Amen, Amen. Hail Arebrais in heaven and earth!

29. Then you (pl.) bless (praise God, pray), 
30. who overshadow (protect?) the body of the Sun!\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{24} Fill thy hands, pronounce 
34. blessing upon this 
35. Hail ye four winds of heaven! 
36. Hail ye four corners of the earth! (the inhabited earth, oikoumenē)\textsuperscript{25} 
37. thou earth (land) of the inheritance 
38. Hail O garden (or power, authority) of the Holy Ones (saints) 
39. [of] the Father!\textsuperscript{26} 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.


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-
3. Fathouriel for Bathuriel, from Hebrew Bait-ṣuri-el, start the name of Christ and the earliest symbol of the crucifixion; and are found in varying combinations, being closely associated also with the “Crucifix Anasta,” the famous Egyptian ankh or life symbol: ṣ. For many examples, see Henri Leclercq, “Christie,” 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, “Christie,” 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-ṭi phonē nenankelōs (“who gives a voice to the angels”) to ef [an]tiphonei nenangelois, “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).

5. The names of Adonai, Eloi, and Abrasax are the most common found on those carved gnostic gems called “Abraxas” or “Abrasax.” Henri Leclercq, “Anges,” in DACL 1:2087–88. Such gems representing “the world of Alexandria and the Egyptian-Greek magical papyri” consist of “stones which figure in superstition as well.” Reiss, “Abrasax,” in Pauly-Wissowa, Realencyclopädie der classischen theologien (On the Ritual of the Byzantine Court) 1.65, in PG 112:568; 1:83, in PG 112:689.


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.


7. Iao is the common equivalent for Jehovah and God.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. Tōôbe 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-tot, meaning size, age, form, which Girard emends to telot, meaning “Kidney, also other internal organs” (possibly from the root tēlōdj, bend, be interlaced). It is the Hebrew kliyot, “the reins, kidneys, inward parts.” Crum, Coptic Dictionary, 813.

11. P-hêt, heart mind, thought reason; cf. the Greek, stēthos, 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.

64. Recognitiones Clementinae (Clementine Recognitions) 1.32–33, in PG 1:226–27.
65. Apocalypse of Abraham 12; cf. OTP 1:695.
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.
13. 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-tčidj m-peljūt 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 pites 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 skeuos), Barnabas, Epistola Catholica (Catholic Epistle) 21, in PG 2:727–82. On the other hand, pithos is an alternative spelling for peithos, a Greek equivalent for pithanos, “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 (atonē).

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. tēttharašē 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 Mizaruel 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 mnof 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. The imagery of the closing passage belongs to the

125. Platarch, De Defectu Oraculorum 22.
126. I.e., the so-called Pyramidologists. A hyocephalus 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 itsnome 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.
135. Cf. 1 Jesus 10, in Schmidt, Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache, 53–54; Apocalypse of Abraham 21–22, emphasis added.
142. Enuma Elish 6:113. It is the circle of time divided into twelve lunar positions, 5–1, 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.