

Though it is not as well attested as many other ordinances, there are still many references to the rite of the Apostolic Prayer-circle in early Christian and Jewish literature. Let us consider some of the more interesting of these, working backwards from the latest reports to the earliest.

St. Augustine in his 237th Epistle (written at the turn of the 4-5<sup>th</sup> centuries) quotes at length "a hymn which they (various old-fashioned Christian sects) say was a hymn of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . and is commonly found in the apocryphal writings." (Patrol. Lat. 33:1034). He quotes a Priscillian writing which describes it as "The hymn of the Lord which he recited in secret to his disciples the holy Apostles, according as it is written in the Gospel: 'After he recited a hymn he ascended the mountain: (Mt. 26:30, Mk. 14:26). It is not included in the canon because of those who follow their own judgment rather than the spirit and truth of God, as it is written: 'The ordinances of the King it is well to conceal, though it is praiseworthy to reveal the works of God.'" (Job. 12:7) St. Augustine would discredit all such traditions by the characteristically rhetorical argument that since nothing could be more important than the things already made public in the Scriptures, there is no point to keeping anything secret (*ib.* 1038). Nevertheless F. Cabrol in the Catholic Dictionnaire d'Archaeologie Chretienne et de Liturgie, I, 787, concedes that the ordinance may be authentic, having disappeared from the Church by the 3rd century. Augustine argues that there is nothing really secret about the business, since everything in it can be paralleled in the Scriptures: he does this by analyzing the hymn line by line: "I wish to deliver (it runs), and I want to be delivered; I want to save and I want to be saved; I want to be begotten and I want to beget; I want to sing and I want to be sung; I want to adorn (or clothe) and I want to be adorned. I am the gate for whoever knocks on me." (*ib.* 1036-7)

The text of the hymn immediately identifies it with the ordinance more fully described in a Greek writing called "The Dialogue of a Jew and a Christian." This very early document was read before the assembled fathers of the Second Council of Nicaea (A. D. 787); it puzzled them, and the business is never mentioned again in Christian sources. The text reads: "Before he was seized by wicked men, by the wicked serpent of the Jewish lawgivers of the Synagogues, he said to us all: 'Before I am given over to those men, let us sing a hymn of praise to the Father, and so go forth ready to face what comes.' Then he commanded us to form a circle, holding each others' hands, and he himself taking up a position in the middle said, 'Amen, do ye whatever I do!'" Then he began the prayer: "Glory (doxa) to thee, Father," and we, standing in a circle followed him and added, 'Amen'; Glory to thee divine grace (charis). Amen. Glory to the thee Spirit, Amen; Glory to thee, Holy One, praise to thy glory. Amen. I praise thee, Father; I thank thee, light in which there is no darkness. Amen. And as we thank thee I pray: I want to be saved and I want to save. Amen. To be delivered and to deliver. Amen. To be wounded and to wound. Amen. I want to eat and to be nourished, to hear and to be heard, to be known and to be all intelligence (nous), to be washed and to wash. When Grace comes I want to pipe and you all dance. Amen. I want to mourn and all mourn. And other things he said. After the Lord had recited these things, with us following him, beloved, we went forth like lost wanderers. (Cabrol. I, 787)

Going back still earlier, we find in the Syrian Acts of John: "He bade us therefore make a circle, as it were a ring, holding one another's hands, and himself standing in the midst he said: 'Answer Amen unto me.' He began then to sing a hymn and to say: 'Glory to thee Father,' and we going about in the ring answered him, Amen. 'I would save and I would be saved!' Amen," etc. (M. J. James, Apoc. of the T., p. 253). The actual performance of such an ordinance is described in one of the oldest Christian documents in existence, the old Syriac "Testament of Our Lord" (Rahmani, 1899). As part of the celebration of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Bishop "would stand with up-raised hands and offer up a prayer at the veil," beginning with the admonition, "If there is anyone who has any ill feelings towards his neighbor, let him be reconciled; if not, let him retire. . . . If anyone feels himself unworthy, he too should withdraw. For God is a witness,

his Son, and visiting Angels, to what goes on here." (FDNJX, p. 36f). The circle consists of both men and women, "the Bishop being first stands in the middle, with a priest on either side of him, and next in order after them on the left a widow, on the right deacons, and then teachers (readers), and then sub-deacons and then deaconesses." (p. 38) The prayer is antiphonal, as "the people repeat these same things, praying" (44). In the prayer the Bishop thanks God "for the Plan of Salvation," by which "thou has fulfilled thy purposes by preparing a holy people, hast stretched forth thy hands in suffering, that they might be freed from such suffering and from the corruption of death." The prayer ends: "Grant, therefore, O God, that all those be united to thee who participate in these sacred ordinances. . . . And the people say Amen. Bishop: Give us unity of mind in the Holy Ghost, and heal our spirits . . . that we may live in thee throughout all eternity" (44). Then certain ordinances are explained: "It is He who gave Adam a garment and the promise that after death he might live again and return to heaven." It is explained how Christ by the Crucifixion reversed the blows of death, "according to the Plan of the Eternal Father laid down before the foundations of the earth." (60)

Still older are some documents designated as the Gospel of Bartholomew. They belong to the "40-day" tradition, and were believed to contain the instructions given secretly by the Lord to his Apostles during the 40-day mission after the resurrection. On one occasion "when the Apostles were met together, Bartholomew said to Peter and Andrew and John, 'let us ask Mary how she conceived the Lord and bore him.'" This was an embarrassing question, and no one was willing to approach Mary on the subject. "And Bartholomew said to Peter, 'You are the President and my teacher, why don't you ask her?' Peter replied, 'She likes you, why don't you ask her?'" (Text in Revue Biblique X (1913), p. 321). After much hesitation and debate Bartholomew approaches Mary on behalf of the other Apostles, and she agrees to enlighten them. They form a prayer-circle, "and Mary, standing before them, raised her hands to heaven" and began to call upon the Father in an unknown language, a number of versions of which are given. "When she finished the prayer, she said, 'let us sit (or stand quietly--kathisomen) on the ground (or prepared place--edaphos); come, Peter, you are in charge! Stand at my right hand and place your left hand under my forearm; and you, Andrew, you do the same thing on my left side' (p. 324) John and Bartholomew are instructed to support or catch Mary if she faint, "lest my bones fail me when I start to speak." In a variant version when the Brethren are met together on the Mount of Olives "Peter said to Mary, 'Blessed one, please ask the Lord to tell us about the things that are in heaven.'" But Mary reminds Peter that as Adam has precedence over Eve, so it is his business to take the lead in such things (ib. p. 327). Having taken position Mary begins to speak: "When I was in the Temple of God (all sources agree that Mary served in the Temple some years before her marriage) . . . there appeared to me one day a manifestation like an angel of unfamiliar aspect . . . And suddenly the veil of the Temple was rent and there was a great earthquake and I fell on my face unable to bear the sight of him. But he stretched forth his hand and raised me up, and I looked up to heaven and a dewy cloud came and (gap) moistened me from head to foot; and he wiped me off with his robe (stole) and said to me, 'Greeting thou favored one, chosen vessel!' and he grasped my right hand. And there was bread in abundance and he set it out on the altar of the Temple, and he ate first and then gave to me. And he put forth his left hand from his garment and there was drink in abundance, and he drank first and then gave to me, and I beheld and saw a full cup and the bread. And he said to me, 'In three years' time I shall send to you my logos and you will bear a son, and through him the creation will be saved. . . . Peace to thee, my beloved, forever and ever. And suddenly he was gone from me, and the Temple was as it was before." At this point, the Lord himself appeared and commanded Mary "to utter no more of this mystery," while "the Apostles were terribly afraid that the Lord would be angry with them." (p. 325) The sacramental episode is exactly like the holy wedding in the story of Joseph and Asenath. The account continues with Jesus giving the Apostles further instructions in the ordinances, but the text is badly damaged. In one version Andrew accuses Mary of teaching false doctrine, but Peter reminds him that the Lord confided in Mary more than any other, while Mary, upset, weeps and says, 'Peter, do you think I am making this all up?' (Evangel. Mariae, 17-18)

Cyril, the last old-fashioned Bishop of Jerusalem, describes a rite in which "the priests stand around the altar forming a circle and wash their hands. The Deacon then calls out: 'Take each others' hands!' which is meant to signify the mingling of spirit

to leave the altar who have any feelings against any brother." (Patrol. Graec. 110-1). The 2nd-century Acts of John XI gives us the same picture, but describes the circle as a sort of dance, having a cosmic significance, as the members recite: "I would wash myself and I would wash others. Amen. Grace is dancing. I would pipe; Dance all of you. I would mourn; Lament, all of you! . . . The number 12 dances on high. Amen. All that which is above participates in this circle. Amen. Who does not move in the circle knows what comes to pass. Amen. (or, "he that danceth not knows not what is being done. Amen." (M.R. James, Apocr. Anecd. II, 11). It is doubtless to this rite that Clement of Alexandria refers in the 2nd century when he writes, "Come to our mysteries and you shall dance with the angels around the unbegotten and Eternal one, while the Logos of God sings along with us...the great High Priest of God, who prays for men and instructs them" (Patrol. Graec. 8:241)

Newly-found Coptic contributions to the "40-day" literature have some interesting references to the prayer-circle. In one "Bartholomew" document, the Lord takes the 12 up into the mountain and standing in their midst gives them certain signs and tokens and then departs (Barthol. Fol. 14b-15a, in Budge, Coptic Apocrypha, 1913). In another version he takes them onto the mountain, "and addressed us in a tongue we could not understand. . . and he gave us his right hand, and sealed us Twelve. And we went up with him even to the veil (skene) of the good Father," where the Lord petitioned the Father "on Behalf of the Apostles for a blessing which should be for all eternity." (Rev. Bibl., X, 363) In the famous but little-known Pistis Sophia, the Apostles gather around the Lord after the Resurrection, with "Thomas, Andrew, James and Simon...in the west with their faces turned towards the east, and Philip and Bartholomew on the south facing towards the north, while the rest of the disciples with the women folk (their wives--nsehime) were standing around behind Jesus, who himself stood at the altar." (Ch. 156, 357-8). In that position, "thus facing as it were the four corners of the world (kosmos), with his disciples who were all clothed in garments of linen, Jesus made invocation: 'Iao, Iao, Iao!'" followed by another phrase in an unknown language, meaning "O Father of all fatherhood without end, hear me all the words of thy truth. . . ." An older Coptic work, the First Jeu, gives the opening words of the prayer as, 'Ie, Ie, Ie!' (I Jeu 51). According to this writing, at every level of the universe and in every world, there are Twelve who officiate and Three who direct and oversee. These form a circle because a circle is "without lower or higher degree since the Twelve must act as equals and as one (ib. pp. 52f, 57). Also, according to this account it was only after receiving the ordinances and instructions that the Twelve sang the hymn before going from the circle (56). This writing contains some interesting diagrams showing the position of the Twelve in the circle around the altar. Also, they must form this circle in order to receive a name which they are eager to possess (90-91)

Carl Schmidt considered Second Jeu to be the most valuable of all early Christian writings. In it, the Apostles and their wives all form a circle around the Lord, who says he will lead them through all the ordinances that will give them eternal progression (II Jeu 99). Then "all the Apostles, clothed in their garments, formed a circle foot to foot, and Jesus taking the place of Adam, proceeded to instruct them (114ff) in all the signs and ordinances in which the Sons of Light must be perfect (116f): "I will teach you all the necessary ordinances, that you may be purged by degrees, and progress in the next life." These ordinances, the Lord explains, are very secret, NOT by their nature, but only because Satan wants them distorted and misrepresented, as they surely will be if they go abroad in the world. (II Jeu 99-100). In the Kærel-Wazz fragment, discovered in 1966, "We made a circle and surrounded him and he said, 'I am in your midst in the manner of these little children.' When he finished the hymn that all said Amen. Then he said other things and each time they must all answer Amen. 'Gather to me, O holy members of my body, and when I recite the hymn, you say Amen!' (II, and end).

In the N. C. itself prayer-circles are referred to directly and indirectly. Thus in Acts 14:20 after Paul had been stoned and left for dead "the disciples formed a circle around him (kyklostaton) and he arose and went to the city." This is a reminder that one of the purposes of the prayer-circle was to ask for healing and to pray for the sick. The second chapter of I Tim. depicts an ideal situation in which all men everywhere would pray "with holy upraised hands and without ill feeling or differences. . . and the same thing with the women, fittingly attired (this refers to a special garment)...let the women receive instruction in silence and obedience" (i.e., let them follow the instructions given). The whole situation suggests less the course of everyday life than a

special school of instruction--the prayer circle. Indeed, every attempt to put these rules into everyday practice (and there have been many) has been a fiasco. Likewise, Mt 11:25--"And when you are standing in prayer, forgive anyone you might have against anyone"--suggests a special kind of prayer with a specific requirement of forgiveness.

The prayer of the Lord in calling upon the Father with upraised hands (on the cross Mt 27:46), closely follows the supplication in Ps. 54:4: "O God hear my prayer, hear the words of my mouth!" This latter prayer, beginning with "El" and ending with "pei", reverses the order of Pei, Lei, El, but follows the same pattern. According to the pre-Christian Apocalypse of Abraham (discovered 1863), "when Abraham rebuilt the altar of Adam in order to bring sacrifice to the Eternal One," as he had been instructed by an angel, he saw men standing around in a circle on the mountain to assist him, and he raised his voice in prayer, saying: "El, El, El! El-Jaoel! (meaning Jehovah)...receive the words of my prayer! Receive the sacrifice which I have made at thy command! Have mercy, show me, teach me, give to thy servant the light and knowledge thou hast promised to send him!" (Ap. Abr. 12:8-9, 17:11-17). Surprisingly, it was Satan who answered his prayer, saying "Here I am!" "But the Angel said unto me, Oh, do not answer him! For God has given him power over those who answer him." Accordingly Joel (in some versions Michael), rebukes Satan and orders him to depart. According to Rabbi Eliezer, Abraham built three altars in order to instruct his children and fortify them against apostasy (a. Wunsche, Midr. Rab. p. 181). "Abraham...would utter prayers on certain occasions while sacrificing, thus invoking the One God. This was the beginning of Jewish Liturgy." (A. Z. Idelsohn, Jewish Liturgy). We are told that in this Abraham was following the example of Adam, who prayed for three days, repeating his prayer three times: "May the words of my mouth be heard! God, do not withdraw thyself from my supplication!...Then an angel of the Lord came with a book, and comforted Adam and taught him." (M. bin Gorion, Sagen d. Juden, I., 260f). Sometimes it is Jaoel-Jehoval who as "the heavenly choir-master" leads the prayer-circle and sometimes it is Michael (G.H. Box, Apocal. of Abr., p. xxv). According to a newly found work temporarily entitled "A Coptic Gnostic Work," the unknown words used in Adam's invocation are composed of the elements lo-i-a and i-oy-el, meaning "God is with us forever and ever," and "Through the power of revelation." (CGW, p. 255). But many versions of these code words are given, and a variety of interpretations. This reminds us that though none of these writings is to be taken as binding or authentic, taken all together they betray common elements which may safely be imputed to the early Christian Church, the Church of the Apostles.

The early Jewish and Christian sources take the prayer-circle right back to the pre-existence. Such a circle, under the presidency of three, is formed in all the worlds, according to I Jeu 53, for the special purpose of giving instructions and communication between the worlds. It was such a circle that met at the creation of this world according to the Serekh Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Tab. X), and it was from such a circle that God chose his rulers (I Jeu 53, Apocal. Abr. 21-22, cf. Abr. 5:22!!). "The order of prayer is in accordance with the emanation of the worlds," since "through prayer we become attached to him who rules the worlds." (G. Weiss, Jnl. Jewish Stud. 1918:2f). Thus the prayer-circle has at all times had a cosmic significance. Its proper place is the temple, because "the Temple is the center from which light goes forth and which at the same time draws everything to itself and brings all things together." (Copt. Gnost. Work, 226; Pistis Sophia, 65 (134)). The ordinances of the Temple are indeed types and shadows of ordinances in heaven (Heb. 8:5). The newly-discovered Temple Scroll (not yet published!) describes the Temple as three exactly superimposed squares with four gates on each side, exactly following the many diagrams of the Apostolic prayer-circle in the Coptic manuscripts. They are like the 12 signs of the heavens, which "circle within their appointed bounds and orbits according to God's established order, which prevails also in other worlds." (I Clem, 20) The cosmic significance of the prayer-circle in the temple could be illustrated as at great length but it does not need to be, the imagery being perfectly obvious. The prayer-circle is one of the less lavishly documented Early Christian and Jewish traditions and should be taken in conjunction with other rites much more fully described.