The Early Christian Prayer-Circle

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 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. 33:1054). 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.' (Tob. 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'Archerologie 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 lawyers of the Synagogue, 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 other's 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. d. James, Apoc. of the T., p. 255). 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,
its Son, and visiting Angels, to what goes on here." (TNTX, 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, widows, 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 sufferings 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—kathismen) 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. 321). John and Bartholomew are instructed to support or catch Mary if she faints. "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. 527). 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 thre 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. 525) 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?" (Examples here are simplified versions from the Gospel of Mary).

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
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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-Jeboel! (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, Abiel (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. Idelson, 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." (B. bin Gorion, Sagen d. Juden, I., 260f). Sometimes it is Jeboel-Jeboal 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-ar and i-o-y-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 sufficiently 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 1 Jev 55, for the special purpose of giving instructions and communicating 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 (1 Jev 55, Apocal. Abr. 21-22, cf. Abr. 5:22f!). The order of prayer was "in accordance with the anamiation of the worlds," since "through prayer we become attuned to him who rules the worlds." (G. Weiss, Jr. Jewish Stud. 1928, ff. 182f). 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 (154)). 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 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.