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PRAYER AT MIDNIGHT

In the third-century church order, commonly (perhaps rightly) entitled the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus¹, there is a striking poetical passage about the proper hours of prayer². The church order attempts to provide sufficient reasons for the selecting of particular moments of the day as hours of devotion. The Lord's Passion provides him with evident and edifying reasons for commending prayer at the third, sixth, and ninth hours. Prayer at cockcrow is enjoined "because at the hour of cockcrow the children of Israel denied Christ." (One might expect St. Peter rather than the children of Israel to be mentioned at this point, and it is not easy to be certain what the author had in mind. But perhaps the reference is to the trial of Jesus before the high priest.) The most intriguing and mysterious passage, however, is the instruction to rise for prayer at midnight³. An unbaptised spouse is allowed to sleep on during this devotion, but a baptised wife is expected to join in the act of domestic prayer. The precept occurs twice in the Apostolic Tradition, at the point where the presence of a doublet has often been detected. On the first occasion it reads:

At midnight rise and wash your hands with water and pray. And if you have a wife, pray both together. But if she is not yet baptised, go apart into another room and pray and return again to your bed. And do not be slothful about praying.

There follow some brief remarks about the need for washing before prayer, a question that seems to have troubled especially the consciences of married couples who had had sexual intercourse. The Apostolic Tradition is explicit that conjugal relations are no pollution. The same problem receives similar treatment in Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, both of whom teach that for all the lustrations prescribed by the Levitical law Christian baptism suffices⁴. Likewise the Didascalia lays down that those who have had conjugal intercourse require no ceremonial bath before communion⁵. Nevertheless, it is clear

1. The document is exceptional among ancient church orders in that, as the passage discussed in this note discloses, the author did not claim to be writing in the name of the apostles of the Lord himself, but only to represent faithfully the apostolic tradition. The quantity of evidence to associate the church order with the name of Hippolytus is small. But what is beyond doubt is that the substance of the text belongs to the first third of the third century, and contains nothing which seems implausible from Hippolytus' pen.

2. Chapter 41 in BOUTE's edition, 36 in Dix's.

3. Prayer at midnight is also enjoined by CYPRIAN, *de orat. dom.* 35-36, and Origen, *de orat.* 12, 2; cf. TERTULLIAN, *Apol.* 39, 18 (of the modesty of food eaten by Christians at an agape) "ita saturantur ut qui meminerint etiam per noctem adorandum deum sibi esse."

4. TERTULLIAN, *de oratione* 13; CLEM. AL. *Strom.* III 82, 6.

5. *Didascalia Apostolorum* 26, p. 119 LAGARDE (pp. 254-55 Connolly), of which the Greek is preserved in *Apost. Const.* VI 29, 4.

that the old custom of washing before prayer was deeply ingrained, prescribed by immemorial custom for both pagans and Jews. However superfluous authority might declare washing to be, most Christians of this period had a ceremonial wash before prayer, especially after having been in bed, just as also they washed their hands in a basin or fountain at the entrance porch of the church building⁶.

There next follows a singularly fascinating section, directing the believer about to engage in prayer to blow on his hand and make the sign of the cross with his hand moist with spittle. Like the sign of the cross, the blowing and spitting have the function of expelling evil spirits, as is evident from parallels in different contexts in the pages of Tertullian.

He asks the Christian wife with a pagan husband if she thinks she can conceal her faith from him when she makes the sign of the cross upon her bed or her body, or "when you eject something impure with a puff of breath, when you rise to pray even at night." He asks the Christian trader in incense how, after having supplied the pagan temples with the necessities of their cult, he can conscientiously spit and blow upon the smoky altars⁷. The exorcist's use of blowing breath as a means of expelling daemons is also illustrated elsewhere in the Apostolic Tradition in expounding the pattern of exorcism before baptism⁸. In the present context the author of the church order sees the puff of breath and the moisture of spittle as representing the purifying gift of the Spirit and the poured water of the baptismal font.

But why pray at midnight? "The presbyters have handed down a tradition that at this hour every creature is still for a certain moment to praise the Lord. Stars and trees and waters stand hushed for an instant, and all the host of the angels minister to him at that hour together with the souls of the righteous to praise God. That is why it is right for all believers to be careful to pray at this hour; and the Lord bears witness to this when he says, Behold a cry was made at midnight of those who said: Behold the Bridegroom has come, rise to meet him; and he adds saying, Therefore watch; for you do not know in what hour he comes."

The tradition that at the hour of midnight the entire creation is hushed and still for the worship of God links the Apostolic Tradition with the Testament of Adam⁹. Of the Testament or Penitence or Apocalypse of Adam much the most interesting section consists in a catalogue of the hours of day and night with notes of the various orders of creation which offer prayer to God at each of the twenty-four hours. The various recensions of the text gives slightly varying details, but one of them, preserved in both Syriac and Greek, specifically states that at midnight "the hosts of heaven and the fiery orders are at rest"¹⁰. The Greek witnesses to this catalogue ascribe the list to Apollonius of

6. Cf. CLEM. AL. *Strom.* IV 141, 4 (after citing *Rom.* 13, 11 f.): By this they say we should go to sacrifices and prayers washed, pure and bright. *Strom.* IV 142, 3 notes the Jewish custom to wash frequently ἐν κολῆ. ORIGEN (*de Orat.* 31, 4) doubts whether the marriage bed is a holy and pure place for prayer. For water at the entrance to churches see PAULINUS OF TYRE in *Eusebius*, *H. E.* X 4, 30-40; CHRYSOSTOM, in *II Cor.* iv. 13, *Hom.* 3, 11 (MIGNE, *P.G.* 51, 300) especially where he continues: "So great is the force of custom that, even if our hands are clean, we do not raise our hands in prayer without first washing them." On the fountain at St Peter's Rome see Paulinus of Nola, *ep.* 13, 13 (*to Pammachius*); on Paulinus' own church at Nola, *ep.* 32, 15.

7. TERTULLIAN, *ad Uxorem* II 5: Latebisne tu, cum lectulum, cum corpusculum tuum signas, cum aliquid immundum flatu explodis (v. l. expuis), cum etiam per noctem exurgis oratum? *de Idololatria* 11, 7: quo ore Christianus turarius, si per templa transibit, quo ore fumantes aras

despuet et exsufflabit quibus ipse prospexit? For discussion see F. J. DÖLGER, *Antike und Christentum III*, pp. 192 ff.

8. *Ap. Trad.* 20 Et cum cessaverit (sc. episcopus) exorcizare, exsufflet in faciem eorum et cum signaverit frontem aures, et nares eorum, suscitabit eos.

9. There is a good bibliography of the various texts of the Testament of Adam in A.-M. DENIS, *Introduction aux pseudépigraphe grecs d'Ancien Testament* (Leiden, 1970), pp. 10-11. The link between the Testament of Adam and the Bohairic version of the Apostolic Tradition (edited by Tattam) was noted by F.J.A. HORT in *Dict. of Christian Biography* I (1877), 38.

10. ἡ ἰβ' ὥρα καλεῖται Ἀλοικροῦλ [v.l. Ἐὐλοῖν καὶ Ἐλῖν, Ἀσιν κελῖν, Ἐὐλοῖν καλῖν]. ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ ἀναπαύονται τὰ τέγματα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τὰ πύρινα τέγματα.

The Syriac versions are most readily accessible in KMSKO's edition, *Patrologia Syriaca* I, 2, pp. 1319-28. Various forms of Greek text have been printed by M. R.