

The mysteries of the Greek alphabet

Part One

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The following is an English translation of a 14th cent. Sahidic Coptic text that was published (with translation and notes) by Adolphe Hebbelynck in *Le Muséon* vol. 19 (1900) in three sections: pp. 5-36, 105-136 and 259-300 and in vol. 20 (1901) in two sections: pp. 5-33 and 369-415, together with 3 plates. This translation will also appear in 5 parts, following Hebbelynck's arrangement.¹

My translation is based solely on the Coptic text published by Hebbelynck. Since he does not provide an Arabic version, I rely on Hebbelynck's notes, supplied to him by the well-known scholar of Christian Arabic, Jacques Forget. Forget dismissed the Arabic text as poor, faulty and sometimes difficult to understand.

The text is in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, where it bears the designation Huntington 393. The catalogue entry says that it is a *codex bombycinus* (silk paper) of 118 folios and was written by Atasios in 1109 AM (1393 AD). It was brought back to the West by Robert Huntington, a 17th cent. Anglican cleric who was chaplain to the Levant Company at Aleppo for eleven years and who collected much written material while he was there, and passed either by sale or donation to the Bodleian towards the end of the 17th cent. Huntington had the singular privilege of being able to inform the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Mount Sinai, Johannes Lascaris, that there was such a thing as the Church of England.

There was always a playful element in the pictogram writing of earlier stages of Egyptian able to convey multiple meanings, as for example with the relatively common word *imj-r3* 'overseer'. The literal meaning of the phrase is 'what is in the mouth', which made it

¹ Cordula Bandt, *Der Traktat "Vom Mysterium der Buchstaben"*. *Kritischer Text mit Einführung, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, 162. (2007) seems to promise an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but I have not read it.

possible for Egyptians to 'economize' the writing by using the sign for 'tongue'. This playfulness was extended in the Ptolemaic period (when the Pharaohs were of non-Egyptian origin), where subtle modifications of words and names were used by Egyptian intellectuals to convey multiple messages, e.g. the phrase *mj r* 'like Re (sun god) could be written using the sign for 'cat' (*mj*) with the sun disk on its head, producing the message that the sun god could also be perceived as a feline creature. This in turn could be an allusion to one of the *Eye of Re* stories in a New Kingdom (c. 1550-1085 BC) text known as the *Book of the Heavenly Cow*, in which Re unleashes Sakhmet, the lioness goddess, against humanity for their disobedience.² The ability to express more than one meaning visually may be one of the reasons why Egyptians never abandoned pictograms when writing texts intended largely for public display in what they themselves called *mdw ntr* 'divine words' (hieroglyphs).

Among the many scholars to have studied Huntington 393 was E. Amélineau, who pointed out that the name of the writer was not $\alpha\tau\alpha\sigma\epsilon$ but $\alpha\pi\alpha\ \sigma\epsilon\beta\alpha$. The question then presented itself: was this Sabas, who founded several monasteries in Palestine in the 5th cent. ? Hebbelynck believes that the Coptic is a translation from someone whose first language might have been Hebrew or Syriac, but he does not say why. On p. 12 of the text the writer refers to himself as $\zeta\epsilon\theta\eta\omicron\sigma$ 'gentile'. Part Four of the text mentions the Arabic alphabet, which would make a 5th-6th cent. composition date more or less impossible. However, this part may be a later addition to an earlier composition.

Letter mysticism is of course known in the letters of Pachomius, of which there are Coptic Greek and Latin versions. The Latin text was made by Jerome, who reports in his Preface to the Rules of Pachomius (*Pat. Lat.* 23 p.65) that Pachomius had learned the *mysticae linguae scientiam*, along with several others, from an angel so that they could communicate with each other without fear of being understood by others.³

A relatively modern variant of this sort of numerological mysticism tells of a young soldier who used a pack of playing cards as his 'bible, prayer book and almanac': the ace is One God, the deuce the Father and Son, the three the Trinity, etc. The earliest known reference

² See, for example, W. Kelly Simpson *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (2003) pp. 289ff.

³ For a detailed study of the Pachomian writing system, but one that does not help significantly with understanding the meaning of the system, see Hans Quecke *Die Briefe Pachoms* (1975).

to it is from 1762⁴ and, though it is without title, it is often known as *The Soldier's Bible, Prayer Book and Almanac*. Such was the enduring popularity of the tale that it was 'rewritten' in 1948 in the USA and recorded by several popular music stars.

The page numbers in brackets are those of the manuscript.

⁴ *Mary Bacon's World. A farmer's wife in eighteenth-century Hampshire* (Threshold Press, 2010).

In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, one God. A discourse uttered by Apa Seba, the presbyter and anchorite, concerning the mystery of God that is in the letters of the alphabet, which none of the ancient philosophers was able to reveal.

(3) In truth, my brothers, it is fitting for us (the blessing in all things)⁵ for each one of us who believe in Christ to hear this mystery which is concealed in the letters of the alphabet, lest we fall in idolatry or blasphemy, but rather persevere⁶ in the example of wisdom.

The beginning of the proclamation of this mystery.

He said as follows

It once happened to me as I was praying steadfastly to God in the desert, one day I took in my hands the Book of the Apocalypse seen by blessed John the Theologos on Patmos. I was reading it until I came to the passage where Christ said to John: I am the alpha and the ômega. And again, a second and third time, he says: I am the alpha and the ômega. When I **(4)** heard these things, I became aware in my heart immediately of that other word of the Gospel of the Lord, saying: Not a single iota or single point will pass until all these things happen.⁷

I quickly became aware that there was a divine mystery in the letters of the alphabet and this was revealed to us. And yet, without any doubt, I believed in Christ, the one who says: Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks will receive. He who seeks will find and he who knocks, it will be opened to him.⁸

Then I begged his goodness continuously to enlighten my mind about the secret mystery of the letters in the alphabet. And his great and indescribable goodness is forever for the worthy and **(5)** unworthy together.

As he received the plea of the Ninivites and Manasses, the adulterous woman, the tax collector, the thief on the right hand of the cross and a multitude of other sinners, he listened to them in his great goodness, so also he considered it worthy to receive the plea of my sinful self. And as he knows and bears witness alone, he is the one who comes to judge the world.

For the mystery, it is not from man we have known it or learned of it, but the one who gave speech to the ass of Balaam when he saw the angel of God. Now he, not for my sake⁹ but

⁵ Syntactically this phrase is out of place, so I have parenthesized it

⁶ There is no verb here, but I have followed Hebbelynck's example and supplied one.

⁷ Apoc. 1,8: 21,6 and 22,13

⁸ Mt 7, 7ff.

⁹ This seems to be the meaning, but the text as it stands is literally: 'not because of mine of virtue'

for the sake of building the holy church, he sent his holy angel and opened the eyes of my soul and enlightened me. I saw myself as if I were in ecstasy.

(6) I saw myself one evening as if I were standing on Mount Sinai, the place where the law of God came into being and the revelation of the nature of the world to Moses from God.

In fear I saw the power of a ruler to which many people were singing, from whom emanates the light to become wise, as he alone knows.

I heard the revelation of the letters and their nature and was taught by him and I also wrote them.

The one who believes therefore what you say is wise. The one who is unbelieving¹⁰ will receive the portion of unbelievers and he will be judged with them on the true judgement day.

The teacher, who does not need teaching teaches us about that mystery hidden since eternity, the letters of the alphabet, saying as follows.

(7) A word of God

These letters are called 'elements', not because they are composed of elements as the vain pagan philosophers think (God forbid !)¹¹, but, because of their form, the elements of the creation of the world are in them when they are written.¹²

One has the form of heaven and earth.

Another has been written to represent heaven and earth.

Another to represent earth and water.

Another to represent the abyss and darkness.

Another the wind and water.

Another signifies the form of light.

Another represents the firmament of heaven.

Another shows the separation of the water above from the water below.

Another represents the revelation of the earth and the gathering of the waters in it.

(8) And another one represents plants.

Another fruit-bearing trees.

Another the beacon light.

Another has the sun and moon in it.

Another is an image of their position in heaven, as we will show forthwith, God willing, as

¹⁰ The first verb is Greek, the second Coptic.

¹¹ Coptic equivalent of the common expression which $\mu\eta\ \gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$. There is a negative particle after 'composed' that has to be omitted in the interest of sense, unless it is understood as a reinforcing negative.

¹² The syntax is loose, so it is difficult to be certain if this is the right understanding.

we have seen them and heard them from God.

Chapter Two

The mystery is of this sort. It was a divine plan to use Greek letters for writing before the idolatry of pagans, so that unwillingly they would submit to the worship of God and confess it. For each hand or right hand of a godless Greek idolater, if he writes with it the form of the letters, without wanting or agreeing, he has gladly confessed and written of his own free will that the world is not godless and uncreated, as was thought by the godless Greeks **(9)** who say this, but that God exists, and from the beginning; he created heaven, earth, sea, all the things we see and do not see of creation; that the earth was invisible and unprepared; and what a truth it is, the divine scripture of Moses, which says, 'There was darkness on the abyss' and also 'The divine spirit is coming upon¹³ the water and 'God is the demiurge¹⁴ of the light, separating the light from the dark **(10)**¹⁵ and again 'At his command the earth came to be suspended above the water.'

And what is there for me say about creation ? For that is not all. There is also the creator of all these things who says: I am the alpha and the omega.

And in this alphabet, the things which are thought to be of slight importance, resided the mystery hidden from the beginning of the world. The number¹⁶ of the form which is in it teaches us the descent to earth of God the Logos **(11)**¹⁷ from heaven, and the time when he migrated to us, and the establishment of the Church by him. And that is not all. But there is also his suffering on the Cross to save us. And through him we have become justified and received sanctification. And not only those upon the earth have received his grace, but also those in hell have enjoyed the presence of Christ¹⁸. He went and evangelized those in captivity in that place. He rose from the dead and went up to heaven. He sent the Paraclete

¹³ The Bohairic OT reads 'was going'.

¹⁴ This word has an interesting range of meanings, from one who works for the public good to the creator of the visible world.

¹⁵ At the top of the page is the following: **ī īc x̄c ā** (10 Jesus Christ 1).

¹⁶ Hebbelynck maintains that this is the 'episēmon', a letter belonging to the earlier stages of Greek writing that survived only as the number 6. Known as a digamma (phonetically an approximant), it corresponded to the Hebrew 'waw', which was associated with the Second Coming and the start of a new era cf. *Pat. Gr.* IX 368ff.

¹⁷ At the top of the page, facing the text at the top of p. 10: **β̄ γ̄c̄ ο̄c̄ ῑα** (2 Son of God 11).

¹⁸ I am inclined to see here elements of belief illustrated in New Kingdom royal tombs, where the solar journey in the underworld is an important feature of tomb iconography. For the term 'parousia' as a way of understanding the Pharaonic concept of *nfrw* cf. R. Hanning *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch* (1995) p. 409, where he describes it as the bodily presence of a divinity.

to us. The Gospel he preached in the whole world, and this will endure until the end.

This treasure, that is each of the letters,¹⁹ teaches us that Christ is a duality, that is, man and god at the same time, which means 'he is he'²⁰. And that he is a sign appearing as the 'episêmon'. And that he is life and the life-giver. He is the Lord. He is also the Ecclesiast of truth who has assembled together the holy Church of the faithful and he is immortal. He is eternal. He is the support and help. He is the beacon and the truth. He is the sanctification and the custodian of all. He is also the beginning and the end. He is the true lawgiver and all that is beautiful and all that is good. he teaches us about the word of the Trinity by means of a strange argument using remarkable letters.

From the **(12)** days of Adam and Enoch God more or less²¹ prefigured the mystery of Christ and the holy Church through these Greek letters. He made them into an instrument of salvation for us gentiles who have believed in Christ, the one who says: I am the alpha and the ômega.

Now, before the exposition, we have to give the interpretation of the remainder of the questions into which we have been initiated concerning the mysteries in the alphabet. They are called 'elements', that is each of the letters, as we said before.

Chapter Three

Among them are twenty-two letters, apart from the *xi* and the *psi*, added by philosophers at the end. In this way, I am speaking of twenty-two letters: they correspond to the number of the twenty-two works made by God in the creation, which are as follows.

The first: the first heaven.

The second: the earth below the abyss.

(13) The third: the water on the face of the earth and below it.

The fourth: the other earth, which is the void.

The fifth: the spirit on the face of water, which is the air.

The sixth: the darkness upon the face of the abyss.

The seventh: the light that is called fire.

The eighth: the firmament called sky.

¹⁹ The language is relatively unorthodox here, but I think this is the meaning.

²⁰ Presumably by implication 'and no-one else'.

²¹ A non-literal translation of two Greek adverbs rarely used in combination: *σχεδόν* and *τάχι*

The ninth: the separation of the two waters, above the firmament and below it.

The tenth: the emergence of the earth from the depths of the water.

The eleventh: the appearance of plants upon the face of the earth.

The twelfth: fruit-bearing trees with seeds on them.

The 13th:²² all beacons that bring light.

The fourteenth: the sun and the moon.

The fifteenth: their emplacement in the firmament of heaven.

The sixteenth: the fish in the waters.

The seventeenth: the birds of the air.

The eighteenth: all sea creatures that are large and those in the waters.

(14) The nineteenth: all the animals.

The twentieth: all the poisonous reptiles

The twenty-first: all the beasts upon the earth.

The twenty-second: man of reason, the perfection of the entire world.

These are the works which God that came into being in the creation of the world, twenty-two of them.

For this reason there are twenty-two books counted in the Old Testament by the Jews.²³

For this reason, twenty-two thousand cattle were slaughtered by Solomon in dedicating the Temple.

God accomplished twenty-two works in the creation from the beginning, revealing the mystery of divine economy²⁴ of Christ's salvation, that is the twenty-two incredible works.

But those who were worthy in his plan²⁵ saw them, and they are:

The first: sending of Gabriel to the Virgin.

The second: the descent from heaven of the Divine Logos.

The third: the entry into the virginal womb in an ineffable way and his **(15)** incarnation in it without the seed of man.

The fourth: the period of nine months of her pregnancy.

The fifth: the immaculate and indestructible birth.²⁶

The sixth: the growth in age of the body of God.

²² Written as letters with numerical value.

²³ The number quoted by several Christian writers, the earliest of whom was Melito of Sardis, cited by Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4. 26. 14

²⁴ The Greek word used in **ΟΙΚΟΥΜΕΝΗ**, 'inhabited world', but later on, p. 16 of the manuscript, it is clear that **ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΑ** has to be understood. Hebbelynck has no note here.

²⁵ Gk. **ΖΥΠΟΘΕΤΙΣ**. Hebbelynck simply translates the sense intended 'ceux qui ont été dignes d'être ses disciples'.

²⁶ This seems to refer specifically to the divine birth and there is no obvious reference to the Immaculate Conception, perhaps because the doctrine did not have much currency in the Eastern Church. It may be significant that it was not officially incorporated into Western Catholic dogma until 1854.

The seventh: the legal circumcision of his flesh.²⁷

The eighth: the glorious baptism which he received at his own wish.

The ninth: the witness of the Father from heaven, saying: This is my beloved son.

The tenth: the descent of the incorporeal Holy Spirit.

The eleventh: the war of Christ in the desert against the devil during his forty day fast, when he overcame the devil, as victory is his at all times.

The twelfth: the miracles he performed, each surpassing the other.

The thirteenth: the way in which he transformed himself in an immutable form.

The fourteenth: the salvific sufferings at his own wish on the Cross.

The fifteenth: the life-giving death of the immortal one.

The sixteenth: his being laid²⁸ in the tomb.

The seventeenth: the descent to hell [and] to bring up the souls of the saints.

The eighteenth: the despoiling of hell to save **(16)** those in that place.

The nineteenth: his holy resurrection from the dead after three days.

The twentieth: his ascent to heaven.

The twenty-first: his sitting at the right hand of his Father on high. I am talking about the humanity when he assumed it.²⁹

The twenty-second: his descent from heaven in his second coming to judge the living and the dead.

So, it has become clear that the twenty-two works in the economy of Christ and the twenty-two works of God in the creation are the model of each other, like the twenty-two letters of the alphabet, as we have already said.

And of them, the letters, we find seven that are voiced: *alpha, ei, hêta iôta, ou, he* and *ô*.³⁰

They are called vowels, because in the writing of each one of them they give a voice.

And there are fifteen letters that are unvoiced: *bêta, gamma, delta, zêta, thêta, kappa, laula*,³¹ *me, ne pi, rô, syma, tau, phi. chi*.

And these are called **(17)** voiceless because they do not complete the entirety of a sound in writing.

But those letters are seven only that have a voice, because God created seven things, which

²⁷ Luke 2, 21.

²⁸ Hebbelynck has a note on this construction, but fails to point out that it is identical to the construction a few lines earlier. The construction has been identified (Crum *Coptic Dictionary* 819b) as a valid alternative to the more common one.

²⁹ This sounds like a reference to some Christological problem, which as a non-theologian I would not wish to tackle.

³⁰ The vowels are written in the margin, and is clear that 'he' stands for 'upsilon'.

³¹ The Coptic name for 'lambda'.

are as follows.

The first: the angels.

The second: the soul of reason, with a spiritual voice outside the body.

The third: man with a voice and body.

The fourth: birds of the air that have a voice.

The fifth: all the beasts that have a voice.

The sixth: reptiles that have a voice.

The seventh: all the animals that have a voice.

Two of those we have mentioned are creatures of reason, without a body, simple, invisible and immortal. that is the nature of the angels and the intellectual soul. They represent the invisible Father and the immaterial Holy Spirit.

One is also synthetic, with a voice that is human, both mortal and immortal like Christ.