

# The mysteries of the Greek alphabet

## Part Two

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After I had sent Part One of this text to Alin Suci, who graciously puts my little texts on his blog, he was kind enough to send me a copy of Cordula Bandt's book and all the Bodleian photographs of the manuscript.

These latter have now clarified for me the pagination and quire numbering. A quire here consists of ten folios. Coptic numbers start at

(verso) **Ϸ**

**ϸ** (recto)

On the next folio there is no numeration, but on the one after that we find the following:

(verso) **Ϲ**

(later hand in Arabic numerals)

**10** (recto)

This system continues until the quire numbers are given, when we have the following:

**1** (fol. no.)    **īc**    **xc**    **α** (end of quire 1)    **β** (beginning of quire 2)    **yc**    **oc**    **1α** (fol.no.)

There is a sort of regularity in spite of what looks initially like an irregular system.

I will continue to write in brackets the numbers that Hebbelynck has put in brackets and will use an asterisk (\*) to indicate the transition to the page that bears only the pagination of the later hand in the top right corner of the recto. At the end of the Coptic-Arabic text there are 12 pages of Arabic, and I hope to publish a printed Arabic text of them with translation after I have finished the translation of the Coptic text.

I have decided not to refer to Bandt's extensive and in-depth study here, largely because my series of articles does not aspire to be much more than a simple translation of the Coptic but also partly because she deals with the Greek text.

There are also fifteen voiceless letters, because there are fifteen voiceless works **(18)** in the creation of the world.<sup>1</sup>

The first: the first heaven above the firmament, viz. the heaven of heaven above it.<sup>2</sup>

The second: the firmament which is second and below the first heaven.

The third: the earth below, the *katakthonion*.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth: the earth above the waters.

The fifth: the water which is in the inhabited world (*oikoumenê*).

The sixth: the air that breathes and gives life.

The seventh: the darkness.

The 8th: the light.

The 9th: all the plants of the earth.\*

The tenth: the fruit-bearing trees.

11th: the stars of the firmament

12th: the sun.

13th: the moon.

14th: the fish in the waters.

15th: the large creatures in the waters.

All these together are fifteen creations of God that, unlike the others, have no voice.

Since the the form of the six days of the creation of the world inheres in these letters of the alphabet, this form is written in a line **(19)** by those who are going learn about them, as in the following scheme:

The first line:  $\bar{\alpha} \bar{\beta} \bar{\gamma} \bar{\delta}$

The second line:  $\bar{\epsilon} \bar{\zeta} \bar{\eta} \bar{\theta}$

The third line:  $\bar{\iota} \bar{\kappa} \bar{\lambda} \bar{\mu}$

The fourth line:  $\bar{\nu} \bar{\xi} \bar{\omicron} \bar{\pi}$

The fifth line:  $\rho \varsigma \tau \upsilon$

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<sup>1</sup> As in Part One I have used numerals where the Coptic uses letters as numerals.

<sup>2</sup> Pronoun must refer to 'heaven'

<sup>3</sup> Misspelt in the text.

The sixth line:  $\phi \times \phi \omega^4$

The *xi* and *psi* have been added to these letters at the end on the advice of many philosophers, as we said previously.<sup>5</sup>

These are now \* the six lines that contain the form of the creation of the world: they start with a vowel (*alpha*) and end with a vowel (*omega*).

The lines themselves<sup>6</sup> being of the creation because of the voice of God, they started to come into being. God said: Let this and that come into being, and it did. And because of the voice of God, everything will be subject to completion.

**(20)** The lines of each of the letters are bound to the seven voiced letters, because all the elements of creation stand in seven things: heaven, water, firmament, air, earth, the abyss<sup>7</sup> and the earth below.

The mystery of the letters was known to those who persecuted the Church: Hadrian, Diocletian, Maximian, Julian the Apostate, who **(21)** thought himself a wise man, by whose polluted right hands the elements were written<sup>8</sup> It was possible for them to condemn themselves of stupidity. And we too in vigorous discourse, let us shame them, saying: How, you fools, do you speak of God through the form of the Greek letters of yours, for he is the creator of heaven and earth, the sea, the light, the darkness and everything visible and invisible.

And you deny this, worshipping idols without any spirit.<sup>9</sup> But you should have confessed the things that were written\* (but did not), so that from now on you are without writing and appear liars through your wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The letters in the last two lines do not have supralinear strokes.

<sup>5</sup> See above **18** of the text.

<sup>6</sup> I understand this word as 'themselves'.

<sup>7</sup> I have used this throughout for the Coptic **NOYN**. See fn. 16

<sup>8</sup> Hebbelynck comments that this is a difficult sentence, and I agree.

<sup>9</sup> The abbreviated Greek word normally has a supralinear stroke to indicate abbreviation.

<sup>10</sup> I have used an English modal tense that Coptic does not have 'should have' and indicated by the use of brackets that this phrase is not there but is to be understood .

Since you have not recognized God through the wisdom of the world, the barbarian<sup>11</sup> church of crowds of fishermen, illiterates, gardeners and prophet labourers calls you to teach you and instruct you in the things you did not know or had heard.

Come now to the tent of the illiterate and those who construct tents,<sup>12</sup> there being with you Plato the ignorant, wearing the folded garment appropriate\* to one who teaches the young, so that now you will know the mystery embedded in the letters of the alphabet.

Let also Homer the blind Greek poet come. Let Aristotle the babblers<sup>13</sup> come. Let Demosthenes come with Pythagoras, Socrates, Hesiod, Democritus and Chrysippus, Menander, and the entire crew of empty Greek philosophers, so that the church of the illiterate, the one whose head is Christ, might instruct them with you in the alphabet **(22)** and the mystery of each one of the letters, in which you take pride and which you write with your hands.

The power of knowing God which is in them, you deny it because you worship creation more than the creator. But we have said this a number of times and at length against the mindless Greeks.

Now, let us turn again to the alphabet, the subject before us. Let us take care to reveal the distribution, viz. the elements of the world, through the forms which are in the elements of the\* alphabet.

I consider it necessary to establish first the form of this universal letter, which is a totality of everything, like the body of man, for he is a storage container<sup>14</sup> for all of the elements which are in it, from the garments and the rest.

And ( to show) how this was from the beginning. and how God created the firmament and completed it above among those on high. He put the water above it like a roof, which he also made together with the firmament, when that water **(23)** and the water below the heaven separated. And how there are two heavens on high, apart from the one which is

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<sup>11</sup> The use of Greek was the normal criterion of barbarian/non-barbarian.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 18, 3

<sup>13</sup> Possibly an allusion to 'nonsensical philosophy' in 4 Maccabees 5, 11

<sup>14</sup> For this unusual word Hebbelynck suggests κρήνιον, a Byzantine Greek form of κρεοθήκη, 'place to store meat'.

above the waters and which precedes them in creation, in which the holy of holies resides, before he created anything of the visible creation.

It<sup>15</sup> is in the middle of the two heavens which were created in the creation of <sup>16</sup>the world, namely the waters that separated the waters above from the waters below the firmament.

Below are two earths. The waters called \* *noun*<sup>17</sup> (abyss) are between them. The first earth is above the waters, and it is called *oikumenê*, the second below the waters and called *katakthonion*. And finally let us draw the form of the creation, which is the *delta*.<sup>18</sup>

A drawing of a large *delta*, subdivided into six sections, can be seen in the ms. just below this passage.

This is the establishment of creation. The form of the letter has three corners. It represents the form of all creation. In the upper part of it, viz. the head without writing, is (**24**) the heaven above the firmament.

And the colour in the middle, I have depicted it like the waters above the firmament. The line below and raised like a vault, I have depicted it like the firmament. The line below is like the earth below the abyss and blood coloured. The colour above this represents the waters of the abyss which between the two earths.

The simple (line) is the one drawn with the small flowers of green on it. This represents the the cosmic earth.

The form of this letter has three corners, for from the holy triad<sup>19</sup> and monad all of creation came into being and was firm. Similarly, above and below three things are arranged: the measure<sup>20</sup> and upper heaven and the firmament and the waters between them. Below is the earth which is below the cosmic earth and the cosmic waters in the abyss which is above

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<sup>15</sup> Grammar requires 'they', because the pronoun is cataphorically related to 'the waters' later in the sentence.

<sup>16</sup> A preposition has to be supplied to provide this meaning.

<sup>17</sup> This term belongs to the Creation Story that developed in the city of Khmounou (Hermopolis) in the 3rd millennium BC, where eight gods and goddesses (ogdoad) created the world. For each god (e.g. Noun) there was a female counterpart (Nounet).

<sup>18</sup> Hebbelynck cites a translation of the Arabic version of this passage made by the Egyptologist Eugène Revillout, which seems difficult to reconcile with the Arabic text. Curiously enough, he cites Jacques Forget as his Arabic expert but clearly not here.

<sup>19</sup> I have used 'triad' because it is closely followed by 'monad', otherwise I use 'Trinity'

<sup>20</sup> As it stands it is the Coptic word for 'measure'.

them. And above and below is the triad (**25**) which comprehends everything. But it is necessary to reveal the form of the letter which has three corners and say why there are three hypostases above and three below.

Above the firmament in its hypostasis are the waters above it in their hypostasis and the heaven of heaven in its hypostasis, which is above the waters on high with the firmament. and which descends *mirabile dictu* outside the edges of the world and firmament until it binds with the depths<sup>21</sup> below the abyss, in a way that cannot be described. These are the three hypostases of which I have already spoken.

The three hypostases below the firmament are the cosmic earth in its hypostasis, the waters of the abyss below in its hypostasis and the lower world, the *katakthonion*, in its hypostasis, so that all human nature may know in these things that it is the holy Trinity which is in everything and fills everything and comprehends everything and guides everything and is the support of the things above and those below, which means the heavenly, the terrestrial and the sub-terrestrial (*katakthonion*).

Look also at the mystery of the holy Trinity: it has two hypostases, simple and invisible, viz. the Father Pantocrator and the immaterial Holy Spirit, the third being visible and invisible, viz. the divine Logos who became incarnate for our salvation.

In the same way there are three hypostases in the higher and lower sections. Above has two natures, invisible and asynthetic, the heaven of the heaven on high and the waters above the firmament. The firmament, which is one of the hypostases, is seen by everyone and is synthetic, made of two things, water and light, like Christ.

In this way also, below is the earth which is in the sub-terrestrial regions with the waters of the abyss, the two asynthetic and invisible hypostases in the part below the firmament.

This earth which we see is one from two natures.<sup>22</sup> The earth together with the trees

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<sup>21</sup> Misspelt

<sup>22</sup> This sounds like the language of the Christological debate that saw a rift in the Eastern Church at Chalcedon in 451 AD. Hebbelynck cites a passage from the work of the extraordinary sailor turned monk called Cosmas Indicopleustes (Indian Sailor), who also talks of two heavens. This is what he says: *We therefore describe the first heaven with the earth, vault-shaped, bound at the extremities to the extremities of the earth ... There is also the firmament, in the middle bound to the first heaven, which on its back has the waters, according to the Scriptures ... From the earth to the firmament is the first area, this world, in which there are angels and human beings and the entire state of existence. From the firmament to the vault above is the second place, the kingdom of heaven, where Christ ascended was the first to enter, preparing for us the promised and living way.*

planted in it, representing Christ.

Like the hexameron, the six days of the creation of the world, in which everything was created and completed, so also the establishment of the hexameron, which is the six parts, I mean the elements that are three in heaven and three numbered on earth. For the creation of God, they are bound and stand in threes, from the Trinity and towards it.

For this reason on the seventh days God rested from the entire creation, so that thereby **(28)** the holy Trinity might appear as uncreated.

The number completed and perfect which is in all the numbers is the decad. which means ten. If you reach ten in the counting, you stop and return to the beginning, which is one, and say eleven.

For this reason on the seventh day is the sabbath celebration of God, who completed the entire creation in six days. It is why the six days and the seventh, which is the sabbath, and the number of the three hypostases of the indivisible \* Trinity make ten in their recapitulation,<sup>23</sup> according to the mystery in the decad about which we have already spoken.

Things of this sort were not known or understood by the Greek children. For they walked in the darkness of ignorance. This letter, which represents creation, the *delta*: this is how God made it. The creation of the world consisted of four elements, like the *delta*, and the fourth element conceals the other three elements **(29)**, like a house, foundations, height, roof beams and general support.<sup>24</sup> Like a shelter to which a border has been set and which has been put near those who know it,<sup>25</sup> this *delta* is in the form we have already described.

The design<sup>26</sup> of the two upper extremities is the area above the creation, that which is visible and that which is invisible. The horn hanging down represents the foundation \* and the turning point and the base on which heaven and earth have been established and the lower part of the earth positioned thus, as the representation we have made of the *delta*.

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<sup>23</sup> The same Greek word is used at the beginning of Ch. 4 of Cosmas, alluded to earlier.

<sup>24</sup> Lit. 'strengthening of all created things'.

<sup>25</sup> Hebbelynck thinks this is a reference to the neighbouring letters inside the *delta*.

<sup>26</sup> Lit. 'dyeing'

The line is the earth below the abyss. The three letters which we have put in the *delta* are as follows. All the elements and all creation have been made by God alone, for himself and in himself: the light, the firmament, the separation of **(30)** the waters above and below, the emergence of the earth from the waters, the growth of plants, fruit-bearing trees, stars, fish in the waters, living creatures, all these are in the triangular delta in its extremeities, as we have depicted.

And this also we will reveal well after a little more, so as to say<sup>27</sup>: from the four elements is the establishment of everything, viz. **(31)** air, fire, water. For this reason the representation of the form of all creation of things that belong to heaven and earth is the *delta*. For this reason there are four corners in the earth. For this reason also four main gateways<sup>28</sup> at the limits<sup>29</sup> of the inhabited world (*oikoumenê*). For this reason also there are four winds in the control of all the winds. For this reason there are four seasons: summer, spring, autumn and winter. For this reason there are four great rivers: Physon, Geon, Tigris and Euphrates.<sup>30</sup>

For this reason the asomatic \* came from the four elements, and thus there are four gospels of Christ. For this reason the number forty is made up four decads, the one which is found in many ways in the Scriptures.

#### Decorated band separates text

Let us now address the 'catholic schematography'<sup>31</sup> and give representation to its unity and form of visible and invisible creation. We have so far described the separation of the arrangement in elements and their creation, \* which is depicted in form and is present in each of the letters and their representation. The divine Scripture of Moses of the genesis of the world is our guide.

We will start to reveal these things clearly. For the holy Scripture says that in the beginning God created heaven and earth. For this reason, in the place where these words of the

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<sup>27</sup> The conjunction here is the Gk ὥστε 'so as ...'

<sup>28</sup> Hebbelynck's translation understands the Greek as 'beginning', but ignores the word that follows it. I have tried understanding the following as one word ζιετ 'gateway'. The Ar. word that translates the Gk ἀρχή looks like the word for 'leading positions'. The Ar. for 'inhabited world' is misspelt here, but spelt correctly elsewhere.

<sup>29</sup> The Coptic corresponding to Gk ἄκρα

<sup>30</sup> The absence of the Nile suggests strongly that this text did not originate in Egypt.

<sup>31</sup> This rather wonderful phrase means something like 'universal symbolism'.



creation have been written, God has revealed to me the interpretation of the form of the elements of these letters in that place, I mean Mount Sinai.

**(32)** If you look at them and put the *delta* for yourself at the beginning of their reading, a character will come clearly to you in the forefront. This thing shows that every building which is started is from the bottom to the top.

**(Δ)**<sup>32</sup> In the beginning God made heaven and earth. (Γ) The earth had not appeared and not yet been worked, viz. the second above the abyss. (Β) There was darkness on the abyss (α) and the spirit of came moving over the waters.

**Δ** \* The line above the *delta* is the earth below the abyss; this drawing which is raised is the heaven of heavens.

**Γ** The green part of the *gamma* represents the earth, which had not yet appeared from the waters until the third day and the white part of the *gamma* represents the waters.

**Β** The black wheel above the *beta* represents the darkness above the abyss and the part below is the abyss. **(33)**

<sup>33</sup>The circle surrounding the alpha represents the waters. The line above represents the breath of air.

We began our explanation of this representation from the *delta* to the *alpha*, as Moses did with the words: In the beginning God made heaven and earth, viz. the foundation, and in the following is the reading of the letters of the alphabet. These four letters stand for us as an interpretation of their form, viz. *alpha*, *beta*, *gamma* and *delta*.

\* Now the ones that follow them, we will attempt to explain what they represent, with the help of the grace of God. The holy Scripture says immediately afterwards that God said: Let there be light, and there was. And God separated the light from the darkness, evening came followed by the dawning of a new day. It was a deed that happened by the order of God

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<sup>32</sup> The Coptic numbers in brackets are written in the margin

<sup>33</sup> I cannot reproduce this figure, but I suppose it must be some of circular object : τροχός

alone, a single letter representing this work on the first day, viz. **ϵ**,<sup>34</sup> and this is its form.

**ϵ**<sup>35</sup> This letter (**34**) was inscribed first by the good teacher. He completed it and made it rounded, as if to say here: Know that this is the form of the world.

And the world was in darkness, I mean the world created by God. If we take it from the right part of the circle, like **ϵ**, it is as if he tells us that that part which is outside the **ϵ** is the place where the light comes<sup>36</sup> into the world. \* This horn which is in the middle of **ϵ** is the separation of light from darkness. Evening came and a new day dawned, which he called the second day.

And God said: Let there be solidity in the waters in the middle of the waters. He separated the waters above from the waters below. It happened in this way. **Ζ** God separated in the middle the waters below the firmament from those above, and the representation of this is the letter that comes after *zêta*, viz. *hêta*.

**(35) Η** <sup>37</sup>Two things were made by God on the second day: they are represented by the two letters we have put down, viz. *zêta* and *hêta*.

And God said: Let the waters gather together in a single place, and dry land emerged. God said: Let the earth produce plants of every sort, with seeds in them.

**Ι Θ** *Iôta* is the plant. The foundations<sup>38</sup> \* themselves are at the top are the seeds in it, each one being plentiful.

And God then said in the same voice: <sup>39</sup>Let the earth bring forth fruit-bearing trees, with seeds in them, like the letter *kappa*.

**Κ** The upright of the *kappa* means the tree. The things which are suspended on its side<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> The Coptic name of the letter.

<sup>35</sup> Somewhat larger than the margin letters above, as are the others below

<sup>36</sup> There may be some word play here, because the Coptic verb 'come' is **ϵ**.

<sup>37</sup> The photo shows several Arabic words, one of which might be the sing. form of 'water' (the plural form is used in the text) and another 'raised, elevated' but these have to be verified by an Arabic scholar.

<sup>38</sup> Hebbelynck translates this word as 'grains'. The meaning must be that each plant has in itself the foundations of its existence and thus the possibility of renewed growth.

<sup>39</sup> Most likely derived from **φθέγγεσθαι** 'speak'.

<sup>40</sup> There are several obvious typographical errors in this passage

and the small seeds in them are visible on the branches of the tree and its fruit. He said: Evening came and a new day dawned, which he called the third day. He had created in them the three works (**36**) of<sup>41</sup> God, together with the letters that represent them, viz. *thêta*, *iôta* and *kappa*.

God said: Let there be stars in the firmament of heaven to illuminate the earth, and so it happened.

λ The form of *laula* means for us a triangle, viz. three points, like the *delta* before it, God having made them like a tent, representing heaven and earth below the abyss. The drawing of two (parts) of the *laula* which diverge from each other<sup>42</sup>, but are bound to each other, we will say of them that they are rays of light that descend from heaven to earth.

Μ He also said: Let there be separation between day and night and between the light and the darkness, like the *me*. The drawing of the part that is light, this is the day. The part which is drawn in black, this is the night, separate from each other.

And God made the two great stars, the greater of the two ruling over day, the smaller ruling over night.

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<sup>41</sup> The word **NTTE**- 'of' seems to be an error for **NTI**-, a particle that introduces a postpositional subject: God had created ...

<sup>42</sup> The Coptic is unorthodox here, but the text is clearly a description of the shape of the letter

