

# The mysteries of the Greek alphabet

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## Part Five

This is the final part of this translation of Hebbelynck's Coptic text as published in *Le Muséon* vol. 20 pp. 369-415.

### (79) Fourth Part<sup>1</sup>

An exposition: not only of the mystery of Christ revealed by the symbol and form of these letters of the alphabet, but also the name of their utterance, the same that has been evangelized.<sup>2</sup>

A law now and a good<sup>3</sup> arrangement, they have been appointed for human nature, painters and illustrators of stories<sup>4</sup> so that every image and stele and likeness that resembles either a king, a high-priest, city, living creature among living creatures, heaven, earth or anything else may give form to it and set down the inscription on it and the representation of the image may resemble its name and form and be clearly visible.<sup>5</sup>

It is necessary for us to set down the images and forms of the letters of the alphabet clearly, also with their names and representations and forms of the things of creation, which are the things that have happened through God in the hexameron (**80**). And in them is the mystery of the Divine Logos who became man for our salvation, our Lord Jesus Christ, calling<sup>6</sup> out in a loud voice.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I have used this term elsewhere to render 'tomos'.

<sup>2</sup> Ar. 'but indeed their pronunciation in which it has also been evangelized'.

<sup>3</sup> Ar. looks like 'traditional'

<sup>4</sup> Ar. has a phrase 'illustration for holy commentaries', which seems to understand what the Coptic has not actually written.

<sup>5</sup> As Hebbelynck points out, this sentence is not easy.

<sup>6</sup> The Ar. verb here seems to mean 'be parched, thirsty'

<sup>7</sup> Hebbelynck understands 'mystery' as the object of the verb 'call', but I think that it is the subject.

And *alpha*, which represents the spirit of God that moves upon the water, it has to be given a name: *sôk*, which means 'spirit' in Syriac, or *maei*, which means 'water'.

Similarly, they call *bêta*, the letter which depicts for us the abyss and the darkness, we have to name it *tham* (**81**), the name for 'earth' in that language.

*Gamma*, which means the 'earth suspended on the water', it has to be called *are*, which means 'earth'. Like *delta*, which is the form of heaven of heavens and the invisible earth, we have to call it *sama*, the Syriac word for 'heaven'. *ei* has the form of light, and had to be called *ôr*, for this was its Syriac name.

To be brief, look carefully, you who love writing.<sup>8</sup> You will not find a single letter of the which has the thing which it represents. Nor is *zêta*, which represents the firmament, called firmament in this same language. And as for *hêta*, which depicts for us the two waters, there is no name of water in it in this same language. Similarly too, *thêta* does not have the name of 'sea'<sup>9</sup> or 'ocean'. *Iôta* does not have the name of 'plant'. In a word, each of the letters is devoid of any image.<sup>10</sup>

We are those who stand in the truth. Some of the letters signify for us living creatures. Others clearly announce the mystery of the dispensation of Christ. And, God willing, we will eliminate the madness of the Jews and pagans together. We will reveal (**82**) that the names of the letters themselves signify the mystery of Christ, who created everything. He gave a form to the wisdom which is in them through the shape of the letters.

Listen, teachers of the inhabited world. I now wish to talk of the mystagogues of the Holy Church: the blessed Clement and Dionysius of great wisdom, Irenaeus the Bishop of Lyon, Epiphanius of Cyprus, who had a profound knowledge of Hebrew and Syriac. And not only these. There are also those called the Hexapla and the interpretations of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion, who were much exercised in the reading of the books of the Jews. They translated them into the language of the Hellenes called Greek.<sup>11</sup> And all of

<sup>8</sup> I cannot find the word in Crum, but this would seem to be meaning. Arabic has no equivalent.

<sup>9</sup> This word refers to natural phenomena, lake and sea. German *See* does the same thing, but distinguishes between the two in gender, whereas Coptic does not.

<sup>10</sup> Lit. 'each of the letters does not have the thing of which they are an image'.

<sup>11</sup> Hellene was a sort of cultural designation, which in Christian literature to be synonymous with the 'pagan'. 'Ionian' was the name taken up in Aramaic, where it was probably based on a spelling that included the old digamma form: yawnayim. This was metathesized in Egyptian to become *wynn* in Demotic and **OYGGIENIN** in Coptic. The Arabic form not surprisingly is similar to the Aramaic. cf. J. Černy *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (1975) p. 213

them together, they are found to have translated the twenty-two letters of the according to the symbolic order we will set down here. If we look at it, we will find clearly the hidden mystery of Christ who said: I am the *alpha* and the *omega*.

**This is the meaning of the letters of the in Hebrew.**

*Alef*:<sup>12</sup> Consent and foundation

*Beth*: House

*Gamel*: Full of what is elevated

*Daleth*: Becoming and creation

*Ei*: He is in it<sup>13</sup>

*Waw*: Sign

*Zai*: Life

*Êth*: Living

*Têth*: Good

*Iôd*: Lord, like also Jaô<sup>14</sup>

*Kaph*: Ecclesiastes

*Lameth*: Immortal

*Mim*: On him and through him

*Nun*: Eternity

*Sêmekh*: Strength and help

**(84)** *En*: Eyes and source

*Phe*: Mouth, image of speaking

*Sadda*: Truth and blessing

*Kôph*: Confirmed calling

*Ris*: Head and beginning

*Sen*: Obeying orders

*Thau*: Completion or at least consummation.

This theosophical and marvellous interpretation of the sound of the name of each letter in the alphabet, these which the ancient letters of the Hebrews and ours too, the Christians have been at pains to set down for us knowledgeably according to the representation of

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<sup>12</sup> The colon substitutes for the phrase 'which is'. I have omitted the article in keeping with the conventions of English, where it is largely unnecessary in generalities. The Arabic text writes the letters to the left of the Coptic text from *alef* to *daleth*, and thereafter the names of the letters to the right of the Arabic text.

<sup>13</sup> Ar. 'he is in it'.

<sup>14</sup> Ar. 'Lord of All'.

what we have written and interpreted individually. And if we join them with each other at the same time, as in a psalm,<sup>15</sup> then clearly we will know the astonishing mystery hidden in them about Christ. The Jews have the shame which they deserve.

The interpretation in the four elements at the beginning, the *alpha*, *bêta*, *gamma* and *delta*, says loudly: Consent and foundation, House, Full of elevated things, which means 'the creation of the foundation of the house', that is, the entire world, the heavenly mysteries that fill the creation of the world, together with the elements and letters and creation in them, all the things in the creation of the world.

And again, in the synthesis, that is the setting down of the elements of the letters, there is a 'sign' in them called *waw*. It shows us what the 'sign' is, as it says immediately afterwards: Life which is in it and the living one and Lord and the Ecclesiastes and the Immortal One.

**(86)** Know then that this 'sign' is the basis of the mystery of Christ, that is, teach and know accurately about the letters called 'sign'. He is <sup>16</sup>

The Lord and eternal

Strength and help

The eyes that are light

The mouth, that is the Word

Truth and sanctity

The beginning and the head

The first commandment, that is, the lawgiver

The completion.

Lord, what do you say when you depict and represent for us in this form of the letters of the alphabet? Do they portray creation in the world that will dissolve and decay and pass away like a shadow ?

How<sup>17</sup> have you not set down things of this sort even as far those things which adhere to them bodily in their form and pronunciation **(87)** ? For your sake, Lord, the eternal living one, in whom there is life, the things relating to the dispensation are set down for us. For

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<sup>15</sup> Probably in the sense of singing to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument.

<sup>16</sup> The text appears to provide an enumeration of titles, and I have put them in the sort of order that makes the list slightly easier to read.

<sup>17</sup> A good deal of what follows means very little to me. The anti-semitic nature of the text, however, is abundantly clear.

which part of creation or the elements and things is the Lord, Jew ? Which is the immortal, that is what will decay of matter, that we call it life and life-giving ? Which of the creations will dissolve and decay, which is called Ecclesiastes or immortal or eternal or strength and help? Which are the elements of creation, Jew, called truth and blessing ? Will you say to me, Jew, that it is the water that will decay or the earth that will pass away ? Is it the heaven or the plants or trees that will pass away and dry up ? Or one of these, is it life and eternal and strength and help ? Will you tell me, wretch, **(88)** that the gloomy darkness above the abyss, which God destroyed, is truth and blessing and strength and eternal.

O your great stupidity and error, will you say that the stars of heaven will fall down like leaves and be extinguished in the consummation ? That they are the 'good, the Ecclesiastes. the head of all' or 'life' or, so to speak, 'the lord'.

God forbid, Jew. There is nothing like this. They belong to nothing and they adhere to nothing. It is the the Divine Logos who became incarnate and joined our body,<sup>18</sup> which has four elements. He is the one prophesied in secret, calling out in a loud voice in the elements that it is necessary in the last time that he join our body in unity like the four elements **(89)**: air, earth, water and the logical soul.

For this reason from the beginning at the time of Adam and Enoch, to whom belong the mystery and pronunciations appropriate to it, the Divine Logos set it down and counted them (pronunciations) among the elements of the letters, the Divine Logos telling us, he being about to become incarnate and to be in us, we from the four elements.

I know that they wonder and are greatly distressed and that the knowledge of the things we say is distorted by many<sup>19</sup>. Not only do those without faith<sup>20</sup> not believe, but also others who believe.

So, let us come to an exposition which is rather superior and full of glory in the word to which we will set a boundary. What is it ? Listen.

The sixth element of the alphabet, which we call *waw*, that is the one that is interpreted as **(90)** light, about which we have been initiated in that which we have passed and uttered,

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<sup>18</sup> Hebbelynck refers to Heb.10,5. Both Coptic versions of this passage in *Hebrews* use a different verb from the one used here.

<sup>19</sup> Ar. 'difficult'.

<sup>20</sup> I think the Ar. says 'not only those who differ from us in faith'.

we are forced to reveal these things clearly, having started from the beginning of the alphabet, which we have already expounded a little.

For he says above without wishing to, the impious Jew, that the *alef, beth, gamel, daleth, ei, ou*, which are interpreted as 'the foundation of the house full of elevated things, in it there will be a 'sign''. That is, the sixth letter called *waw*. It is almost as if to say that the foundation and founding of the house of the elements of the world and the creation of these letters are the 'sign' and the mystery concealed from the creation of the world.

Isaiah prophesied about Christ to Ahaz the king<sup>21</sup>: I have given you a 'sign',<sup>22</sup> deep or elevated.

That one said: I will not tempt the Lord my God.

Isaiah the son of Israel said: For this reason the Lord will give you a 'sign'. Look, the Virgin will conceive and bear a son and he will be called Emmanouel, which means 'God is with us'. This means, the one born to the Virgin, he is God in truth.

Thus he interpreted for us this voice. The accurate interpreters called it out aloud.

Matthew the holy evangelist set down his gospel in Hebrew. He wrote it for those Jews who were baptized in Jerusalem. Those who translated it, which is their only gospel, later into Greek were inaccurate in the understanding of Isaiah. They should have said **(92)**: It is God who is with us, because *emma* means 'he is with us'.<sup>23</sup> *ou* means 'he' and *el* means God. As *bathouel* means 'the house of God' and *gamouel* means 'the resurrection of God', so also Emmanouel means 'God is with us'.

In Syriac and Hebrew *ou ô* means 'he'. An inscrutable help is made for the Church by the difference of the word that says: God in strength is the one born to the Virgin. The expression 'God is with us' is often said in this passage.<sup>24</sup>

As he says: The place where two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them in their midst. The expression 'God is with us' clearly means: **(93)** He who was born to a Virgin, he is truly God. It is called a 'sign' because his dispensation is an entire wonder, and he made a renewal of humanity high above the boundaries of nature.

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<sup>21</sup> Is. 7,10: The Lord said to Ahaz: Ask for yourself ...

<sup>22</sup> The Coptic is slightly ambiguous here. As it stands, one automatically reads **ⲁⲓⲧ** (I have given) **ⲛⲁⲕ** (to you). However, the LXX version uses **αἴτησαι** (ask), and this has undoubtedly caused some mild confusion.

<sup>23</sup> This is not quite right, but it serves the writer's purpose

<sup>24</sup> Is. 8,8 and 10.

For what happened through Moses is a 'sign', when he saw the burning bush that did not burn. The oven to which the three youths were consigned but did not burn was also a wonder. For this reason, Christ is an excellent 'sign': he is divine fire but did not burn the womb of his mother. He descended from heaven and left it behind him when he became incarnate without human seed in his mother's womb, the daughter or rather the living mother of all, and was born in the womb. He preserved her virginity. For this reason, Simeon the holy elder called him a **(94)** 'sign' to be spoken against.<sup>25</sup>

Behold now these extraordinary proofs of these letters show clearly the elements, which are called the 'sign' that indicates Christ clearly. The faithless contradict this 'sign', they against whom we speak. It is necessary for us to start again from *alpha*, according to their own language.

*Aleph*, which is Syriac and Hebrew and Arabic<sup>26</sup>. It is interpreted and by agreement is named 'aleph', which means 'thousand' א<sup>27</sup>: so in the three languages 'aleph' means 'thousand'.

We also have to speak about *bata* in the same sequence. The same is true of *gamma* and *delta* and *ei*. They too agree in the same way.

And then **(95)** the sixth letter comes to the fore: it is called "sign". For it represents the six thousand years since Christ became incarnate. If you speak against this, faithless Jew, why do you call *alpha* 'aleph', which is a thousand. And yet in its type and form it means for us water and the spirit, as we have already said. Tell me, blind one, why was this letter, called 'sign', not first, second, third, fourth, fifth, seventh or any of those that come after the seventh, but is made sixth.

How has a name of 'sign' not been given to *gamma* in the letters? But a 'sign' alone was given to it which comes from *gamel*, because you are full of elevated things, that is the indescribable **(96)** mysteries of the heavens. א is called by them *daleth*, that is genesis, which is creation. For everything happened through it and to it, and without it there was nothing.

<sup>25</sup> Lk. 2, 34. The Arabic text gives the words of Simeon to Mary in direct speech, but I do not understand them: 'You are ... a 'sign' in yourself'. The missing word may be *sahûr* but there is nothing in the Arabic NT that resembles the word.

<sup>26</sup> Hebbelynck in his prefatory remarks (*Le Muséon* 19,9) speculates that the presence of this language is an indication that this section is a later addition.

<sup>27</sup> The letter is written with the diagonal stroke through it that normally indicates 'thousand'.

The one who has been is the 'sign' of these elements of this letter which is the birth<sup>28</sup> before the times of the light of truth, which illuminates all who come into the world. I will also tell of this great work, how these five letters which are before this letter, I mean the 'sign' without an elevated name, but all the letters coming after the light are full of praise.

For those who are before the light, they say about them: foundation and house and the rest of those who come after them, as we have already said.

If we name the sixth letter 'sign', they will soon start to praise each letter in its interpretation, that is life, (97) the living, good, the Lord, the immortal teacher and the rest that come after this, according to the order of what was said before and what follows.

If you know well in faith the things that we say, you will find the one way which is in the letters in the Book of Moses about the creation of the elements of the world. For in this place are clearly the elements before the sixth which is the 'sign', signifying an elevated name. In the creation of the world, no creation is named good until the light appears. It is written: God saw the light that it was good. And yet, that light and the letter which is a 'sign' signify Christ. Since nothing of what happened before the light is said to be good, like the letters before the 'sign' and things of this sort, it is possible to say that the entire creation of the world is in evil, error and godlessness. Before the descent of Christ, when he became incarnate and completed the entire dispensation.

And like the entire creation, that was set up in six days, so also Christ for the new creation came to an indescribable unity in six indivisible parts, the Divine Logos, the logical and intellectual soul and the body which it assumed with four elements. Four and two make six. So, it is called the sixth. For this reason he became incarnate in the six thousandth year of this aeon. For this reason also there are two letters only voiced in the number six thousand: *aleph* and  $\bar{\epsilon}$ ,<sup>29</sup> which represent Christ. *Alpha* is the first of all the elements, the representation of the Divine Logos, the beginning which is before all the elements.

(99) It comes after the four elements, representing our soul, after the four elements of our body, and the soul was created for it by God. Ultimately, the Divine Logos took them in an indescribably unity.

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<sup>28</sup> Hebbelynck's suggestion, which fits in with the Arabic.

<sup>29</sup> In fact, the letter is  $\zeta$ , known as the *episeimon*, an alternative name of the digamma (*waw*).



I will also ask about something doubted<sup>30</sup> by the Greeks: how this letter, the sixth in the Hebrew and Syriac and Arabic<sup>31</sup> alphabet, the one which is clear and named the 'sign', is not written in their own Greek alphabet.

Similarly too, the name that adheres to the fourteen letters is the 'sign', the sixth in number, which you Greeks do not have in your Greek letters.

What would loss would you sustain in the sequence of your alphabet (**100**) if you were to write it in this way, because it would not violate you in any way. The witness of this is the two elements of *xi* and *psi*, which you add to the twenty-two Greek letters to which God gave form.

So, God thought to reveal this matter also to us because we do not agree with the elements of the letters, which represent all creation and represent Christ (**101**) the creator. For this reason the letter called 'sign' was placed in Syriac letters and those from Abraham, in this way: it did not represent any creature. The Greeks were still in agreement with the Syrians in the name of the fourteen letters, as we have said.

Listen in truth and pay attention to the fineness<sup>32</sup> which is in all these words. The Syriac and Greek alphabet agree with each other.

ā *aleph*, this is *alpha*.<sup>33</sup>

ḅ *beth*, this is *bêta*

ḡ *gamel*, this is *gamma*

ḏ *daleth*, this is *delta*

ē *ei*, this is *ei*

ḥ *waw*, this is the letter called 'sign', which the Greek has been unable to pronounce because he does not believe in Christ, whom it represents.

Zai, this is *zêta*

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<sup>30</sup> Hebbelynck translates 'écarté'. I am not sure which Gk verb he means. I think the verb is ἀπορεῖν, which seems to be confirmed by the Arabic.

<sup>31</sup> The sixth letter in the Arabic alphabet is *hâ'*

<sup>32</sup> I understand this word to mean 'fineness' cf. Crum *Coptic Dictionary* 565a. I am not sure how Hebbelynck understands it. What I can read of the Arabic text: 'Understand and pay attention in truth ('pronunciation' written in the margin) and say the meaning ...'

<sup>33</sup> In the right hand margin next to the Arabic are various Coptic/Greek cursive letters, each with a supralinear stroke.





also the letter for (106) 900<sup>37</sup>: there are three elements which are counted triadically, like the Holy Trinity.

These things were not written by God in the elements of the alphabet which represent creation and the dispensation of the Divine Logos. It reveals that the consubstantial Trinity is uncreated.

That they are of this sort, listen attentively. For the 'sign' (*episemon*), which is the sixth, represents six thousand years. I mean the letter that represents Christ. There is an unvoiced letter after it, *zêta*, which signifies the completion that will happen in the seventh aeon, the seven thousandth year, for the completion of the world is unvoiced and indescribable. About the day and that hour no one knows, not even the angels, except God. For this reason the letter is unvoiced.

(107) The eighth letter is a vowel and signifies this: in the eighth is the resurrection of Christ. For this reason it will happen in the voice of an archangel and a divine trumpet. For this reason *hêta* and *ômega*, which reveal the resurrection, are both called vowels.

If you do not accept what we say, tell me why the two vowels are like a wall for the *episemon* of the 'sign', the ζ, in between ε and η. There are seven vowels. Seven works were created by the voice of God. These seven vowels are not in sequence. One of them you will find after (4) Δ, one after (3) Γ and one after (2) Β, and another after (1) Α.<sup>38</sup> So, the signs and miracles which are in the voice of God did not happen at the same time after each other, but according to a turning of the times and ages, like the consonants, which we have defined.

The first vowel is *alpha*, which is Adam, which is written with *alpha*. He was brought into existence by the hand and word of God. There are three consonants after *alpha*. In the three thousand years, that is, the 2, 242<sup>39</sup>, the great dreadful event of the cataclysm was triggered by the voice of God.

And again God ordered Noah and his children. Through seven consonants after three

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<sup>37</sup> There is a slight difficulty with reproducing the numbers here: Ϟ and ϗ are on different lines and appear to be joined to each other by a semi-circular stroke that cannot be reproduced here (900)

<sup>38</sup> Hebbelynck is probably right when he observes that the writer simply wants to indicate that the vowels are somehow interspersed between the consonants.

<sup>39</sup> As in LXX.

vowels we know the image of the division of languages, which happened through the voice of God when the tower was being built. There had been one single language among people (**109**), and this was divided into many languages.

The third vowel is followed by the consonant *thêta*, which shows that God was responsible for exodus of the Israelites from Egypt before he gave them the Law. He regulated them with ten sentences on the tablet.

*Iôta* is a vowel, which represents the ten sentences of the Law. For *iôta* is ten. All this happened in the four thousand years of the world. God gave the ten sentences in the Law with his voice.

The second work happened through Joshua the son of Naue. The third is their inheritance of the land of Canaan. The fourth is the work of the Judges. The fifth thousand years,  $\bar{\epsilon}$ , God depicted and drew for us with his own voice and commandment. The fifth  $\bar{\epsilon}$  is the temple built by Solomon. God spoke in him and he was heard by the prophets. They spoke to him in the glory in which he appeared to them.

As after four  $\bar{\alpha}$  consonants, that is *pi*  $\bar{\pi}$ , *rô*  $\bar{\rho}$ , *symma*  $\bar{\sigma}$  and *tau*  $\bar{\tau}$  is (**110**) the sixth letters of *hu*  $\bar{\eta}$ . In this way after four settlements of the sons of Israel and the temple built on the sixth day of this aeon, the six thousand years, Christ God, the great voice and word of God happened thus.

The four consonants, which follow the fifth vowel, the symbol of the construction of the temple

$\bar{\alpha}$  four things are what they signify

$\bar{\epsilon}$  the rule of misguided monarchs of Israel, the destruction of the temple

$\bar{\rho}$  the captivity of the people

$\bar{\alpha}$  the way of life<sup>40</sup> of the people.

After these, in the seventy weeks about which Daniel said: Their completion will be with Christ, in the form of the sixth vowel as we have already said.

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<sup>40</sup> ΔΙΑΓΩΓΗ. Hebbelynck translates ΔΙΑΣΠΟΡΑ, which one might expect but is not in fact there. This passage is not in the Arabic text.

The one who is of flesh and contradicts what we say, whether he wants to or not, we will take issue with him, saying: Why do the seven vowels in the alphabet not come together and follow each other? But one comes after three consonants, the first one being  $\bar{\alpha}$ ; the second is a consonant  $\bar{\beta}$ , the second; the third is  $\bar{\gamma}$ , also a consonant; after *delta*  $\bar{\delta}$ , similarly fifth after four. The sixth is consonant next to the fifth  $\bar{\epsilon}$ ; the seventh vowel, which represents the completion, comes after two consonants, which separate it from the vowels. That letter is the seventh  $\omega$  which is  $\bar{\omega}$ , for there are two elements, that is in the sixth thousand  $\bar{\zeta}$  years and the seventh the preaching of the Gospel took place. After the seven the completion of the world will surely happen to the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen. I completed my writing on day 14 of Pachons.<sup>41</sup> Year of Martyrs, 1109.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The 9th month of the Coptic calendar.

<sup>42</sup> The Year of the Martyrs (AM) is 284 AD.