



The Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria  
St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church  
Des Moines, Iowa, USA

# The Coptic Language

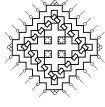
Introduction

ἸΕΡΟΓΛΥΦΙΚΑ

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Adeeb Bassili Makar

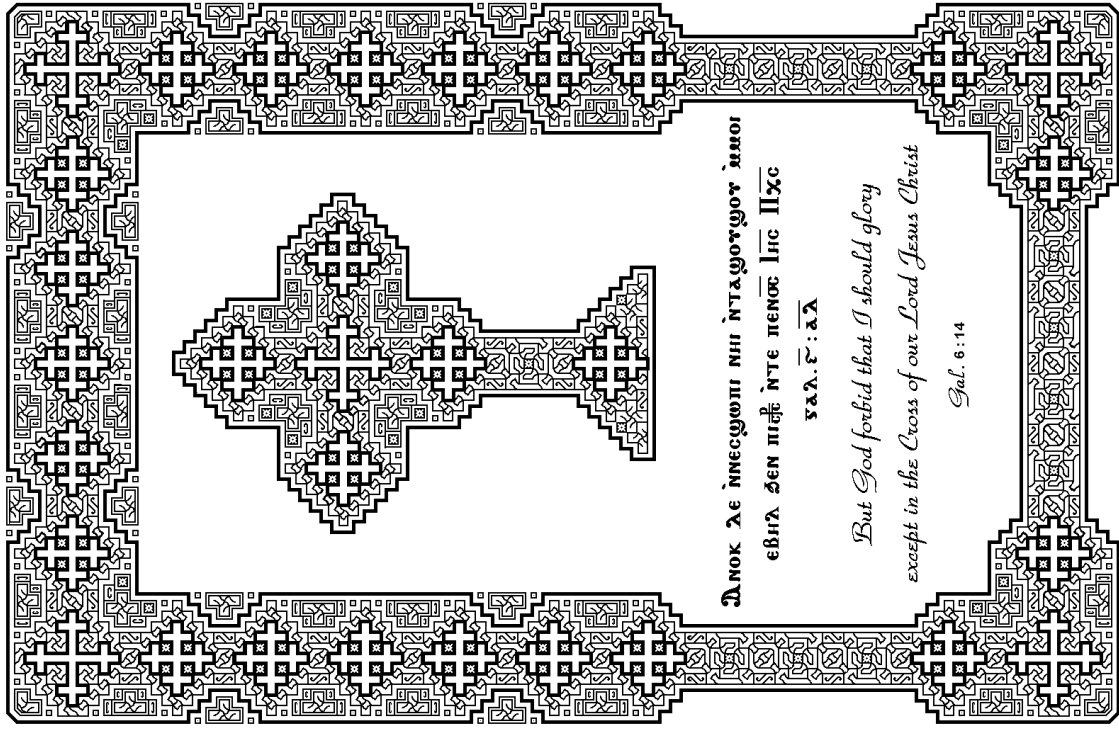




### Notes

1. The Coptic language is described by Professor Rodolphe Kasser of the University of Geneva, Switzerland as **"one of the most beautiful, most cleverly structured and most musical in the world"** \*
2. These lessons are designed to teach some introductory basic principles of the "Bohairic" Coptic Dialect which is used by the church in its liturgical services.
3. The pronunciation is the traditional pronunciation that is used by the Church as well as the few families who use Coptic as their daily language.
4. There are 32 letters in the Coptic alphabet. The first 25 are derived from the Greek letters that have their origin in the Egyptian Hieroglyphic script, the last 7 letters are directly derived from the Egyptian Demotic Script.

\* Kasser, R., *The Coptic Language(s)*, The Coptic Encyclopedia, Vol. 8, Atiya, A.S., ed., Macmillan Publishing Co., NY, 1991, Page 145.



ΔΝΟΚ ΔΕ ΙΝΕΣΩΨΗ ΝΗΙ ΙΝΤΑΨΟΥΨΟΥ ΙΜΟΙ  
ΕΒΗΛ ΔΕΝ ΠΙΦΕ ΙΝΤΕ ΠΕΝΟΕ ΙΗΣ ΠΧε  
ΣΑΔ. Γ : ΔΔ

*But God forbid that I should glory  
except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*

*Gal. 6:14*

# The Egyptian Alphabets;

## Their relationship to other alphabets

Adeeb B. Makar, Ph.D.

### **Egyptian Contributions to the development of civilization:**

The contributions to civilization made by Egypt are best described by Dr. Leonard H. Lesko who wrote: "*The ancient Egyptians made outstanding contributions to the development of civilization. They created the world's first national government, basic forms of arithmetic, and a 365-day calendar. They invented a form of picture writing called Hieroglyphics. They also invented papyrus, a paperlike writing material made from the stems of papyrus plants. The Egyptians developed one of the first religions to emphasize life after death. They built great cities in which many skilled architects, doctors, engineers, painters, and sculptors worked. The best known achievements of ancient Egypt, however, are the pyramids they built as tombs for their rulers. The most famous pyramids stand at Giza. These gigantic stone structures - marvels of architecture and engineering skills - have been preserved by the dry climate for about 4500 years. They serve as spectacular reminders of the glory of ancient Egypt.*"

The rapid development of their writing system was facilitated by their discovery of methods to make paper and ink. Walter A. Fairservis, Jr.<sup>2</sup> states that "*One of the most important contributions made by ancient Egypt was papermaking. Paper was made from the papyrus plant that grows abundantly in the marches of the Nile Valley. Before the Egyptians invented paper, writing was done on clay tablets, which crumble, or on stone, which is heavy and hard to carve. Unlike the rest of the ancient world, the Egyptians required only a brush and some ink, and they could easily carry these materials anywhere they went.*" Donald Jackson also affirms<sup>3</sup> that "*Indeed the marriage of liquid ink, pen and paper first brought about by the Egyptians was such a revolutionary step that it is still the fundamental basis of most handwritten communication today.*"

### **Egyptian Alphabets as the Ultimate Source of the Modern Western Alphabet:**

The Egyptians developed the Hieroglyphic Writing around 3000 BC<sup>4</sup>. It consisted originally of signs that stood for words or ideas, but gradually each sign stood for a syllable or a sound. Hieratic, which is a simplified cursive form of the hieroglyphic, was soon developed by Egyptian scribes who used it for both religious and nonreligious purposes<sup>5</sup>. Around 700 BC Demotic writing was developed. This was simpler and faster to write than the hieratic. The scribes used it for correspondence and record keeping<sup>5</sup>.

Around 1500 BC, the Semites developed an alphabet which is based on the Egyptian hieroglyphic system<sup>4,6,7</sup>. The Phoenicians, one of the Semitic peoples perfected an alphabet around 1000 BC. The Greek alphabet, which is the progenitor of Roman (Latin) letters<sup>4,6</sup> was directly derived from the Phoenician alphabet<sup>4,6,7,8</sup>. The Greeks not only took the forms of letters, they also took over some Phoenician names for the letters. The first letter of the Phoenician alphabet,  $\aleph$ , its name is aleph, meaning ox, became  $\Delta$ , or alpha in Greek. The second letter,  $\beta$ , or beth, meaning house, became  $\beta$ , or beta in Greek<sup>4</sup>.

Based on the above-mentioned facts, the English alphabet of today can be traced back to the sign writing of ancient Egypt. Barbara Mertz states that: "*The birds and the bees of the ancient Egyptian script may have a more direct relationship to our own alphabet than we realize*". Davies<sup>10</sup> cites a quote by Gardiner describing this observation: "*The hieroglyphs lives on though in transmuted form within our own alphabet*". Compton's Encyclopedia<sup>6</sup> states that: "*The Latin Alphabet is a development from the Greek alphabet. The Greek alphabet, in turn, is an adaptation of a writing system which was developed among the Semites of Syria about 1500 BC. Outwardly, this first Semite writing seems to be an original and individual creation. Its principals however, are certainly based on the Egyptian word-syllabic writing*". Marianne Cooley<sup>4</sup> states that "*The English alphabet developed from a number of early writing systems,*

*beginning with the sign writing of Ancient Egypt". In the same reference<sup>3</sup>, she shows, in a table form, the development of each letter starting with the Egyptian (about 3000 BC) followed by Semitic (1500 BC) followed by Phoenician (about 1000 BC) followed by Greek (about 600 BC) followed by Roman (114 AD) and finally the modern alphabet. Paul Johnson, in his book *The Civilization of Ancient Egypt*<sup>11</sup>, succinctly summarizes the development of modern Western Alphabet from the ancient Egyptian Alphabet in the following: "*The Egyptians mined at this Sinai site (the ancient turquoise mines) both during the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom. During the reign of Ammenemes III, around 1800 BC, Semitic workers were used at this site. One of them, evidently a man of creative ingenuity, became familiar with Egyptian hieroglyphic writing and determined to adapt it to his native Canaanite language, then unwritten. His stroke of genius was to select the alphabetic signs from the hieroglyphs, rejecting the consonantal groups and the ideograms. The new script survived and gradually spread north through Palestine and Syria, acquiring cursive characteristics in the process. In northern Syria, near the ancient port of Ras Shamra, it took on a cuneiform style - that is, it was adapted to the writing materials of the area, tablets and stylus. This Ras Shamra script, ancient Ugaritic, has no other connection with Sumerian or Babylonian cuneiform. It is merely a modified form of the Canaanite-Egyptian alphabetic script. It was gradually adopted by the entire region, in various forms, and above all by the Phoenicians, who had an alphabet of twenty-eight letters. In the ninth century BC, the Greeks took over the Phoenician alphabet more or less as they found it, retaining even the names of the letters. They reversed the direction of the script from right-to-left to left-to-right, but the really important change they introduced, made essential by the structure of their own non-semitic tongue, was the vowel-sign. They switched the signs for six Canaanite consonants not used in Greek to vowels, and thus gave the world the structure of the alphabet more or less as we have it today. The ultimate source of the Western alphabet, therefore, is ancient Egypt*"<sup>11</sup>.*

The Microsoft Encarta 96 Encyclopedia<sup>12</sup> traces back the origin of several English letters to their hieroglyphic origin. For example, the letter "A" is traced back to the Egyptian hieroglyph of an eagle, the letter "B" from the hieroglyph for "crane", etc.

## **The Development of the Coptic Alphabet:**

### **A. The origin of the word "Coptic":**

The words "Copt, Coptic" as well as the words "Egypt, Egyptian" have the same origin; and that is the old Egyptian words describing Egypt as "E-KA-Ptah" meaning *the House of the Spirit of Ptah*. (E means *House*; Ka means *Spirit*; and *Ptah is one of the famous Gods of Old Egypt*). Therefore, the words "Coptic" and "Egyptian" are linguistically one and the same word.

### **B. The origin of the Coptic Alphabet:**

The present 32 letters of the Coptic Alphabet are derived from two sources; The first 25 letters are modified from the Greek alphabet (table 1); *it should be remembered that the origin of these Greek letters can be traced back to the old Egyptian letters*<sup>4</sup>. whereas the last 7 letters are a modification from Demotic letters (table 2)<sup>13</sup>.

### **C. The contribution of the Coptic Alphabet to the Russian Alphabets:**

The current Alphabet of the Russian Language is known as the Cyrillic Alphabet. It was invented by Saint Cyril (826 - 869 AD) and Saint Methodius (815 - 884 AD), two Greek brothers who were missionaries to Russia during the 9th Century. They knew Coptic and they introduced, along with the Greek letters, Coptic letters such as C (written as Y) into the Russian Alphabet that is still in use in Russia today<sup>14</sup>.

### **D. The Greek words in the Coptic Liturgy and the Coptic Language in general:**

In the first few centuries of Christianity in Egypt, the Greek language was the cultural language of the world, in much the same

way as the English language these days. Greek was always the language used in international councils (Ecumenical councils). Many of the Coptic Church fathers e.g. Saint Athanasius, our 20th Pope, wrote mainly in Greek because, at that time, this is how people everywhere in the world would understand. However, many other Church fathers wrote in Coptic. Many Egyptians, especially in Alexandria, spoke Greek very fluently, in addition to Egyptian (Coptic) their mother tongue.

When Saint Mark came to Egypt and started his ministry there, Greek was the language that Saint Mark used and it was the language of the Liturgy that He handed down to his successors. When the Liturgy was later translated from Greek to Egyptian (Coptic), the Church kept some Greek words and expressions, and the Copts were very familiar with the meaning of these words. However, it is very important to remember that over 90% of the Liturgical service Σ [Z]ηΖ←≡ Z and the praises (♥ / ♠∞ Z is in Egyptian (Coptic), and less than 10% is in Greek.

The following are few examples of words of Greek origin that are used in our Liturgy:

1. Words of Greek origin that are used by the Coptic Church and many other churches. Actually these words are now part of many languages, including the Coptic as well as the English language:

Word	pronounced	Meaning
ΔΠΟ†ΤΟΛΟ†	Apostolos	Apostle
ΜΑΡΤ-ΘΡΟ†	Marteeeros	Martyr
ΔΓΓΕΛΟ†	Angelos	Angel
ΔΙΑΚΟΝ	Thiyakon	Deacon
ΚΑΥΟΑΙΚ,	Katholikee	Catholic
ΟΡΥΟΛΟΧΟ†	Orthodoxos	Orthodox

2. Greek words that are sometimes used but have Coptic equivalents

Greek word	Coptic Equivalent	Meaning
Υεο† (The-os)	Ⲭⲏⲟⲩ	God
Υεο†οκο† (Theotokos)	Ⲭⲏⲁⲩⲏⲟⲩ	(Efnoutee)
ΔΓΓΟ† (Agynos)	Ⲭⲁⲩⲟⲩⲟⲩ	(Mas-noutee)
ΔΓΓΑ (Aglyya)	Ⲭⲁⲩⲟⲩⲟⲩⲁⲃ	(Fee-eth-owwab)
Ε-φ- (Evkee)	Ⲭⲁⲩⲟⲩⲟⲩⲁⲃ	(Thee-eth-owwab)
Δⲏⲉ†ⲧ, (Anestee)	Ⲭⲁⲩⲟⲩ	(Eshleel)
Δⲁⲩϸ† (Aleethos)	Ⲭⲁⲩⲟⲩⲟⲩⲁⲃ	(Aifonf)
	Ⲭⲁⲩⲟⲩⲟⲩⲁⲃ	(Khenoumethmee)

3. Traditionally, there are few hymns that are usually sung in Greek, ΔΟΧΑ ΠΑΤΡΙ (Thoksa Patri) ΔΓΓΟ† ΟΥεο† (Agynos o-The-os) -Ρ†ΤΟ† Δⲏⲉ†ⲧ, (Ekhrastos Anestee)

But the majority of Church hymns are in Coptic e.g.

- Ⲭⲉⲏⲟ-ⲣⲁⲏⲏ (Khen-efran)
- Ⲭⲟⲩⲟ (Ep-ouro)
- Ⲭⲁⲩⲟⲩⲟⲩⲁⲃ (Tai-shouri)

It should be remembered that the Coptic Language represents the final development of the Egyptian language. Cyrus Gordon, in his book, "Forgotten Scripts", states that: "The Coptic Church still preserves the native Egyptian language written in Greek characters, so that we have an unbroken tradition of Egyptian texts spanning about five thousand years"<sup>15</sup>. As a matter of fact, the Coptic language was the real key to the deciphering of the hieroglyphic and Demotic scripts by Champollion<sup>16, 17</sup>. As a French teenager living in Grenoble, France, Champollion dreamed

of being the one who would unlock the secrets of the Rosetta stone. He studied both ancient History and Coptic language. Christine Hobson in her book "*The World of the Pharaohs*"<sup>18</sup> describes Champollion as "A genius with a gift of languages, including Coptic which he mastered early, believing correctly, that it would be the key he would need one day to understand Egyptian". Later on, he used his knowledge of the Coptic language to decipher the hieroglyphic writings on Rosetta stone. This great accomplishment of Champollion widely opened the doors to the unlocking of the glorious mysteries of Pharaonic Egypt<sup>15, 16, 17</sup>.

### The importance of the Egyptian (Coptic) language.

1. It represents the final stage of the development of the Egyptian tongue, and in the words of Cyrus Gordon<sup>15</sup>, we have "an unbroken tradition of Egyptian texts spanning about 5000 years". Coptic language was the spoken language in Egypt until the 11<sup>th</sup> Century when it was gradually replaced by Arabic. There are some historical records indicating that it was still the spoken language in some areas of Upper Egypt until the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>19</sup>.
2. It was the language that Jesus - as a baby visiting Egypt with Saint Mary and Saint Joseph - heard and spoke. Egypt was the only country Jesus visited outside his home country. Therefore, we feel that our old country and our language were blessed through this visit.
3. Although the Coptic language, at the present time, is no longer used by significant number of Egyptians, it still lives on in the hundreds of words in the Egyptian Arabic dialect spoken everyday in Egypt<sup>20</sup>.
4. The Bible was translated to the Coptic language around the second century by the Egyptian scholars of the theological School of Alexandria, (Pantenus and his disciples)<sup>21</sup>, who were very fluent in both Greek and Coptic. Therefore the Coptic translation is considered one of the most reliable and accurate translations available.
5. The original writings of several early Church fathers were in Coptic, e.g. the writings and teachings of Saint Antony, the first Christian monk in the world, and those of Saint Shenouda the archmandrite were all in the Coptic language<sup>21</sup>.

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14. Reference 13, Page 34.
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  16. Reference 5, Pages 229 - 230.
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 21. Reference 13, Pages 27 - 28

Table 1  
The 25 Coptic Letters adapted from Greek Letters

Coptic		Greek	
Letter	Cap Small	Letter	Cap Small
Alpha	Ⲁ ⲁ	Alpha	A α
Veeta	Ⲃ ⲃ	Beta	B β
Gamma	Ⲅ ⲅ	Gamma	Γ γ
Delta	Ⲇ ⲇ	Delta	Δ δ
Ei	Ⲉ ⲉ	Epsilon	Ε ε
soo	Ⲇ	Not used as a Greek Letter	
Zeeta	Ⲋ ⲋ	Zeta	Ζ ζ
Eeta	Ⲍ ⲍ	Eta	Η η
Theeta	Ⲏ ⲏ	Theta	Θ θ
Iota	Ⲑ ⲑ	Iota	Ι ι
Kappa	Ⲓ ⲓ	Kappa	Κ κ
Lavla	Ⲕ ⲕ	Lambda	Λ λ
Mei	Ⲗ ⲗ	Mu	Μ μ
Nei	Ⲙ ⲙ	Nu	Ν ν
Eksee	ⲟ Ⲡ	Xi	Ξ ξ
O	Ⲃ ⲃ	Omicron	Ο ο
Pee	Ⲅ ⲅ	Pi	Π π
Ro	Ⲇ ⲇ	Rho	Ρ ρ
Seema	Ⲉ ⲉ	Sigma	Σ σ, ς
Tav	Ⲋ ⲋ	Tau	Τ τ
Epsilon	ⲍ Ⲏ	Upsilon	Υ υ
Fei	Ⲑ ⲑ	Phi	Φ φ
Kei	Ⲓ ⲓ	Chi	Χ χ
Epssee	ⲕ Ⲍ	Psi	Ψ ψ
OO	Ⲏ ⲏ	Omega	Ω ω

Note that most Coptic letters are written in a somewhat different way than the corresponding Greek Letters.  
Note also that the Coptic names of the letters are in many cases different from the Greek names

Table 2

Coptic Letters derived directly from

older Egyptian Scripts

Letter	Hiero glyphic	Hieratic	Demotic	Coptic Cap	Coptic Small
Shai				Ⲛ	ϣ
Fai				Ϥ	ϥ
Khai				Ϩ	ϩ
Hori				Ϭ	ϭ
Ganga				Ϯ	ϯ
Cheema				ϰ	ϱ
Tee				ϲ	ϳ

Table 3. Summary of the Names and Pronunciation of the Coptic Alphabet

Letter	pronunciation
Alpha	as in <b>f</b> ather, or as in <b>f</b> an
Veeta	based on position in the word
Gamma	based on position in the word
Delta	TH as in <b>th</b> en, (D in names)
Ei	as in <b>p</b> en, or as <b>rain</b>
Soo	it is the numeral 6
Zeeta	as in <b>z</b> ebra
Eeta	as in <b>m</b> ee <b>t</b>
Theeta	as in <b>th</b> ink
Iota	based on position in the word
Kappa	as in <b>coo</b> k
Lavla	as in <b>loo</b> k
Mei	as in <b>m</b> other
Nei	as in <b>n</b> ancy
Eksee	as in <b>bo</b> x
O	as in <b>Br</b> itish <b>no</b> t
Pee	as in <b>P</b> eter
Ro	as in <b>r</b> oom
Seema	based on position in the word
Tav	as in <b>t</b> ake
Epsilon	based on position in the word
Fei	as in <b>f</b> an
Kei	based on position in the word
Epsee	both p and s are pronounced
Oo	as in <b>thr</b> ow
Shai	as in <b>sh</b> ake
Fai	as in <b>f</b> an
Khai	as in Arabic <b>Kh</b>
Hori	as in <b>h</b> ouse
Ganga	based on position in the word
Cheema	as in <b>Ch</b> urch
Tee	as in <b>tea</b>
Jinkim	Makes the letter a Separate syllable



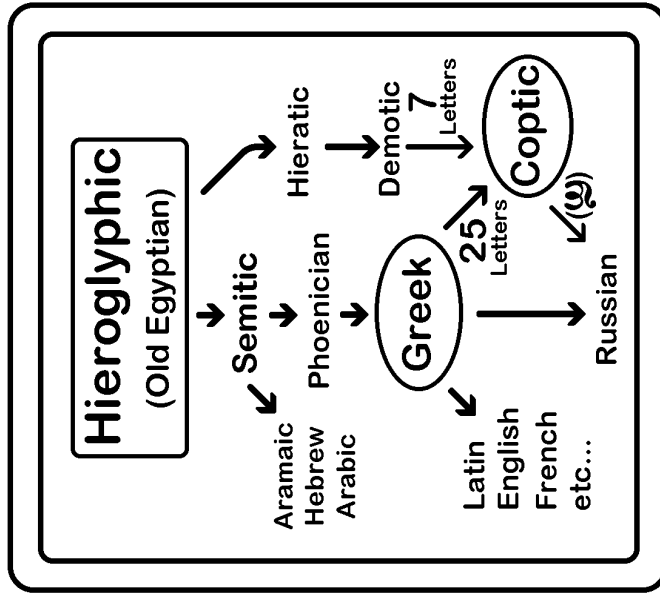


Figure 1  
A flow chart showing the development  
of several alphabets from  
the Egyptian Hieroglyphic Script