

# The mysteries of the Greek alphabet

## Part Three

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**N (37)** The diagonal line<sup>1</sup>, which is the downward line sloping in the middle, we have to depict half of this white; the other half that is lower black. Above the diagonal, which is in the middle, this is the start of the day of the course of the sun. But the beginning<sup>2</sup> that is below is the beginning of the night according to the course of the moon; in a word, a single beginning in its representation of the two stars.<sup>3</sup>

\*And these he placed, he said, in the firmament so as to shine over the earth.

**O** This circle is the image of the firmament of heaven. We have to depict the form of the sun and the moon in its middle, according to the word of the truthful God the Demiurge, and to depict the stars on it according to the colour of the firmament. Evening fell, and a new dawn appeared on the fourth (**38**) day, the four works of God in it and four letters representing the works: **o, n, m, λ**<sup>4</sup>

This is the sort of thing our guide said to us, when he gave us the representation of them, telling us in detail : The form of the fourteen<sup>5</sup> letters which we have written are the form of the elements of the creation of the world and the things that happened in succession in the creation of the world.

The letters that come after the fourteen letters are representative and written in the mystery \* itself of Christ and his Church.<sup>6</sup>

When therefore we find the number fourteen clearly coming ...<sup>7</sup> Christ and the Church in

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<sup>1</sup> The fem. form of *λοξός*

<sup>2</sup> Hebbelynck translates *ἀρχή* as 'extrémité'.

<sup>3</sup> Arabic: 'in short, a single beginning in the form of these two stars'.

<sup>4</sup> These letters are between lines 3 and 4 of the Arabic text and the style of writing looks more like Bohairic than Sahidic.

<sup>5</sup> *z* is omitted..

<sup>6</sup> The Arabic appears to say: 'the letters which are written and illustrate the mystery of ....'

<sup>7</sup> The Ar. is clear enough here, but I am unable to read it.

the second testament. And the Holy Scripture bears witness to them clearly.

Matthaios the holy evangelist makes a genealogy of Christ: Every generation from Abraham to David to the collapse of Babylon, fourteen generations (**39**) and from the collapse of Babylon to Christ, fourteen generations. Alpha itself<sup>8</sup>, the first of these letters represents the dispensation of Christ, which means these fourteen letters. And from the birth of Ismael to the birth of Isaac, this represents Christ through the way in which his father himself began to sacrifice him and bring him as a sacrifice to the invisible God, there are fourteen years.

Therefore, the moon as the companion of the sun represent Christ and the Church. For Christ is the sun of righteousness who shines on all who come into the world. The moon is the Church that shines at all times in the Logos of God. It is bright in the middle of the course of the darkness of this world. One might almost say<sup>9</sup> it is like the moon of the night, which is at its peak on day fourteen<sup>10</sup>. When it reaches day fourteen, it begins to wane and become dark. And when it begins from day one, its sphere is complete (**40**) in fourteen days.

Similarly, the Pasch was performed in Egypt by the sons of Israel when about to leave it. They slaughtered the sheep representing Christ and they ate it on day fourteen of the month.<sup>11</sup> God preserved the and brought them out of the bitter servitude of the Egyptians.

Christ our God ate the Pasch with his disciples on day fourteen of the month. When he was crucified for us, he saved us from the bitter servitude of the wicked Pharaoh, who is the devil.

(**41**) Jacob, who is Israel, in his fourteenth year while in the house of Laban took Rachel for his wife and prefigured Christ and the Church. For this reason the number fourteen comes upon the dispensation of Christ.

For after the seventh day of creation of the world and and the faith of the law of the sabbath, which is seven,<sup>12</sup> God revealed a new creation, the Church, almost as if to say it is like something that is seven, that is, we believe through the four gospels in the indivisible

<sup>8</sup> The Coptic text contains the word  $\alpha$ , which makes little sense here as it stands and is ignored by Hebbelynck. However the Ar. understands the word as the preposition 'to': 'From the alpha also to this first letter ...' ?

<sup>9</sup> Translates the Gk particle  $\sigma\chi\epsilon\delta\acute{o}\nu$  followed by the Coptic infinitive

<sup>10</sup> I have simplified the somewhat tortuous Coptic

<sup>11</sup> Lit. 'the moon'

<sup>12</sup> An abbreviated formula for 'the seventh day'

Trinity: four and three make seven.

All these things we bring them forth, gathering them together to confound the Jews first and the Gentiles. And God knows that I do not say this from my own heart, but rather as I was helped and taught by the Teacher of Truth who is above all teaching. He is the one who initiated us into the the other eight letters of the alphabet, which come after what we have written. He also brought us to the mystery of the dispensation of salvation through his coming to earth. He is the one who appeared in the flesh and was justified in the spirit.<sup>13</sup>

For he says: This much is clear, that the sabbath is the observance of the law, which is seventh in number. God multiplied this with the seventh<sup>14</sup> times ten, which is the circle of *ou*. And after this begins the eighth times ten (**42**), which is *pi*. This means the mystery of the New Testament of Christ our God in all the works and forms that are in him, as we will write down to glory God the Father and his only-born Son and the Holy Spirit creator of all and of the same nature, now and at all times for ever and ever. Amen. Poor Shenoute, may God have mercy on him.ϥ<sup>15</sup>

## Second Part

A clear exposition that the eight letters in the alphabet explain the mystery of Christ and the Church, as we will set forth.

¶ We have heard the divine scripture of Moses: After the flood the ark of Noah rested on the mountain of Ararat, for (**43**) Ararat is interpreted as the 'coming forth<sup>16</sup> of the witness', that is, the Church of the Divine Logos that has come down from heaven, as<sup>17</sup> according to the manner which is in the *pi*, we shall explain clearly.

For this letter and its form, we have been instructed in it by the mystagogue, that it signifies the Holy Church of Christ.

For it is indisputably in the form of an ark and a temple. Eight decads, which is eight times ten,\* by which it is counted. In this way the descend on Christ and the Church.

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<sup>13</sup> I Tim. 3,16

<sup>14</sup> One would expect a cardinal number here.

<sup>15</sup> The doxology signals the end of the First Tome. Shenoute must be the scribe. The two Coptic letters (*koppa* and *theta*) add up to 99, which is the numerical value of ἀμήν.

<sup>16</sup> The Coptic can mean 'coming up/down' and my translation follows the Arabic.

<sup>17</sup> Not quite clear whether this is a Gk or Coptic word, but the meaning is clear enough.

First, in the ark of Noah there were eight souls who went into it, I mean Noah, his wife, three sons and their wives. They were the ones who have become parents for us<sup>18</sup> like the Church.

For that ark, there were wild beasts hostile to each other living in peace, without strife, such as the bear, the sheep, the wolf (**44**), the dove, the eagle, the little sparrow in his hole and all the rest of the birds.

In this way here too in the holy Church almost all nations together partake of the mystery of Christ in the form of mystic food, without conflict or strife.

In this way too Moses the hierophant in the twenty-fourth year of his life prepared an ark of God, with eight things in it, according to the symbol of this letter *pi*<sup>19</sup> and this holy Church.

**Π** This is the symbol of that ark of the Testament, there being windows <sup>20</sup> in its middle, five cubits high and 5 wide, for on day five and a half of this age the Church was built again and crowned by Christ our God, to whom belongs the foundation and the crown of the ark as well.<sup>21</sup> It has and in it (**45**) is their number<sup>22</sup> eight, which means the indestructible wood with the rod of Aaron in it. And the vase of gold with the manna in it. It too is the manna in the number<sup>23</sup> with the two tables of the law and the word of God was written upon it.

These are the eight works about which we spoke previously.

For this reason, on the eighth day, circumcision takes place according to the law, because Christ is the one \* who surpasses the Sabbath. He rose from the dead on the first and the eighth days, and it became the Lord's Day. He liberated it from the bitter servitude of the devil. He drew us away from these completely through the spiritual circumcision of holy

<sup>18</sup> The Coptic has a Greek-looking word that might be from *γίγνεσθαι/γεννᾶν*, but no such form is attested. The Ar. is different from the Coptic: '... who became for us examples in the world. When the world was ...'

<sup>19</sup> This letter is in fact 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ar. translated by Forget: 'This is the form of the ark with holes in the middle (which may refer to what goes before or what comes after) and its width 5 cubits, because in 5,500 years, thus it is said in five and a half days of this century that the Church was built and adorned by Christ our God, who is the door [*misunderstanding of a Coptic word that looks like 'door'*] and the foundation and the ornament of everything. And at the front of this ark, there are eight sides.'

<sup>21</sup> I am not sure how to understand this, because both words are in extremely unusual positions here.

<sup>22</sup> Hebbelynck translates 'in it there were eight objects', and this probably the meaning, if not a translation of the text. The word for 'number' has a slightly irregular appearance.

<sup>23</sup> Hebbelynck wisely ignores this phrase. The Arabic translation has attempted to understand it: 'The manna and the manna also entering in the number and the tablet of the law.'

baptism.

For this reason every unclean spirit is removed for seven days. On the eighth day they are cleansed. Similarly, those (46) who are enslaved for seven years are released in their eighth year. Similarly, land that has been sown on the orders of God for seven years,<sup>24</sup> in the eighth it lies fallow. Similarly, after seven weeks, which is the holy Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down from heaven and caused the world to shine with its \* grace.

And to reinforce this view, listen to those who come after them. There have been seven generations of Cain on earth, corrupt in their deeds, in particular their fratricide father, this one from whose hands the earth, after having opened its mouth, swallowed the blood of Abel. These, I mean the generation of Cain, were obliterated by God, who purified the earth with the great cataclysm.

And there was a new people from the generation (47) of the righteous Seth and a new world, which came to increase in breadth and blessing.

Similarly, there were also seven generations until God removed Enoch, giving us an anticipatory sign of the immortality of the resurrection. In this way too, from Lamech to the presence of Christ, there were seventy generations, that is ten times seven. And these are recorded by the evangelist Luke.<sup>25</sup>

In this way too, we have found that the number of seven \* times ten years, that is seventy, was spent by the Israelites whom God delivered from the bitter captivity of Nebuchadnezzar, as a symbol for us who have been delivered by Christ from the tyranny of the evil devil. For after seven weeks of years of captivity for the Israelites, we were saved by Christ our God when he became man in the Blessed Virgin.

In this way too, God ordered through the law that every human being (48) who had a debt, if he spent a week, that is seven years, his debt would be remitted. Similarly, one of the prophets called the Church from the beginning Tyre, which is the high mountain. For he says: After seven years God will visit Tyre.<sup>26</sup> David, the Divine Father, agrees with these prophets in the Psalm<sup>27</sup> he wrote about the Church\*: Its foundations are on the holy mountain. The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.

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<sup>24</sup> The syntax of the Coptic is fairly strained here.

<sup>25</sup> Lk. 3, 23 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Is. 23,17

<sup>27</sup> Ps. 87,4ff.

Praises have been sung about you, city of our God, that is the Church of the nations. And the earliest cult has been left idle from this time.

For this reason, the same spirit that speaks in the prophets says quickly: I will remember Rahab and Babylon who know me. And now, look, the foreigners and Tyre and the people of the Ethiopians are those who (49) have been there<sup>28</sup>. Zion the mother<sup>29</sup> will say: A man and a man<sup>30</sup> were in it, and it was the most high who founded it. Which means God the Logos, who became man in Zion of truth and the mother of all those living spiritually, the Mother of God.

This is what was said by our teacher, who has not received instruction from another. He revealed to us about the eight and eight<sup>31</sup> times ten of the reckoning, which is this, \* I am speaking of this letter which we have already put down earlier and which is called *pi*.<sup>32</sup>

He explains to us the creation and the type of the form of this letter, which is *pi*. He says to us: The two uprights in this letter mean for us two people. For the Church subsists with its people and it (50) is established fundamentally of Jews and Gentiles.

The line above on the two columns signifies for us Christ.

The line which comes from above is above everyone, it is Christ. For this reason it is called the cornerstone. For the stone, he said, was rejected by the builders and became the headstone, filling and strengthening the two walls, which are the two peoples.

For like *êta* in its form, through (51) the two perpendicular lines, it signifies for us in front of<sup>33</sup> the two waters, the line<sup>34</sup> in between them because of the separation which has happened in the middle of them, I mean the waters above the firmament and those below it. In this way too, the form of the letter *pi* shows the two peoples through the two perpendicular lines in it. The one which is above these is in the image of a cornerstone, that is Christ God of the Old and New (Testament).

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<sup>28</sup> Hebbelynck understands this to mean that these groups have been re-united there.

<sup>29</sup> Hebbelynck points out that the LXX is different from the Hebrew text, which has been translated by Jerome in the Vulgate: *numquid Sion dicet* ?. Jerome observes that the LXX μήτηρ Σιών is a corruption of μήτι Σιών

<sup>30</sup> Hebbelynck points out that this is a Hebraism meaning 'many'.

<sup>31</sup> The Coptic here is the ordinal number: this eighth.

<sup>32</sup> I have tried to translate the Coptic as it stands. I am not sure how Hebbelynck has understood this.

<sup>33</sup> The Coptic word **ϣⲗⲟⲏ** usually means 'in front of' or 'previously', , but I do not understand it here.

<sup>34</sup> One of the meanings of **κεράια** is 'sailyard' (see **κέρας** meaning V,5 in *LSJ*)

So, we will follow these in this way. Let us draw the element that follows *pi*, namely *rô*.

**P** This *rô*, which is the hundredth in the counting system, signifies for us in its form the descent of God the Logos from heaven. He who came to visit and save the one who had wandered away from the good flock of ninety-nine. For one and ninety-nine make up the number of this letter. The hundredth of the sheep is Adam, the spiritual and mental one. In the same way too, the ark of Noah, which is representative of the Church, as we have already written, was built in one hundred years. Like Abraham too in his hundredth year, Isaac was born to him, who symbolizes Christ and the Logos Father.

Symbol. Looks like  $\rho\omega$ , but with a full circle on top.

The circle on top of this letter signifies for us heaven, as we have already explained these things previously (52) in the symbol of *ou*. The fire-coloured line that descends is the descent of the Divine Logos from heaven, in the symbol of a beam of light illuminating the world. For God is a consuming fire.

For this reason *symma* follows *rô*. As this was revealed to us that we might know well that, through this beam of the descent of the Divine Logos from heaven, the entire world became light, almost spiritually. As we have known these things with certainty from previous letters, such as the *ei*, which is like *symma* in the semi-circle in which it is. *Symma* is also a circle, but not complete, like the form of the circle in *ei*. We have already spoken about *laula* and the two lines in it descending from above, that they are beams, like the beams of *rô* which descend upon the world.

Symbol as above

(53) These are the things we have represented and described according to their character, namely the *rô* and *symma*.

**C** The circle of the *symma*, representing the world and the light which is on the right side, is the descent of perceptible light to it, as we have said. But we have given form to them previously in the character of *ei*.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup>

Rather cumbersome way of reinforcing the comparison between the *epsilon* and the *sigma*.

As God said: Let there be light etc. The circle which is at the top of the *rô* represents heaven. The fire-coloured line that descends like a beam means for us the descent of the Divine Logos, as we have already said. This *symma* is the form of the world which shines through *rô*, like the symbol of illumination of *ei*, as we have already said.

But the illumination of that one is a corporeal light, according to the fineness and mystery in it (54), as God said in that place: Let there be light, and there was. For this reason, having a substance, it goes and comes in the changing of the days.

This light of *rô* is spiritual and heavenly. This letter in the language of the Syrians is called *phi*. which means in their language the mouth.<sup>36</sup> For the Divine Logos and the mouth of God established with it his descent to the world and incarnation in it.

**T** For this reason, *tau* is the next letter. This letter tells us clearly that it means the cross of Christ in its representation, of which Jesus Christ the Lord of Glory says: A single *iôta* or single line will not pass in the law until all this happens. This same *iôta* and the this same line are (55) the cross.

Thus spoke the Lord about this *tau*, the symbol of the cross of salvation. As Moses raised the serpent in the desert, it is also necessary that the son of man be raised. If a serpent is suspended on piece of wood, you will find that its form is like this.

Symbols cannot be represented here.

We have to explain these words clearly. Once again we will represent these: the beam of the *tau* is an image of the cross, for the beam descending from the *rô* illuminates the world, which is the *symma*.

What is that from the *rô* ? It is the beam descending from heaven illuminating the world, which is the *symma*. What sort of thing is the *tau* beam, this in which the beam of the divinity has appeared illuminating the gulf of hell ? For the gulf and the abyss of hell are indicated by the form of this final and fourth letter, (56) the *ou*. The one who came down from the cross, the Divine Logos, revealed himself to those in the darkness and shade of

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<sup>36</sup> Hebbelynck points out the Semitic word for 'mouth' would something like this, and in turn *ro* is the Coptic word for 'mouth'.

death.

It too is the form of the element, it reveals the descent of Christ to the pits of hell and his re-emergence from them.

Text under left-hand diagona of VI: This is the descent

Text under right-hand diagonal of V: This is the ascent

**V** For the form is a dragon, representing the resurrection from the dead on the third day. The mystery is in the resurrection on the third day, I mean the holy resurrection appointed by God.

**Φ** Not only does the form of these letters reveal to us a symbol of this sort, but their name also in Syrian, which is the first tongue and speech of Adam (**57**). These things clearly reveal the mystery of Christ, as I will now try to demonstrate.

The interpretation of these three letters (**ρ Ϸ τ**) is a very great thing. For the Divine Mystagogue has taught us about the descent of the Divine Logos from heaven through rô. Also his illumination of the world and his coming<sup>37</sup> into it was the beam which descended in rô and *symma*. The representation of the revered cross happens through *tau*. \* The descent to hell of Christ, this letter happens to them which comes after these and its element.<sup>38</sup>

For he reveals to us his ascent to heaven from upon earth, and this element he, the Divine Teacher, has taught us to write it according to the way in which we will put it down with the word in it, saying: #

**Φ** This circle in this letter signifies for us the form of the world. Like the circle in *ei*, *thêta*, *ou* and *symma* (**58**): the one thing they all represent is the form of the world. The line that goes from down to up is the sign of the ascension of Christ to heaven. For this reason the upright line represents the circle of the cosmos in the two beginnings in it. So the great mystery of the ascension of Christ is depicted for us in the form of this letter which we have written before, the *phi*.

<sup>37</sup>

The sentence requires the verbal noun form here, but this is not it.

<sup>38</sup>

The language in this sentence is pretty hopeless.

## χ

There are various words written around this letter.

At each end of the two crossing strokes are the names of the Evangelists.

Between the two ends in the upper part is the word for 'rising'

Between the two ends in the lower part is the word for 'setting'

At each side in the middle are the words 'north' (left) and 'south' (right), thus completing the representation of the cardinal points.

Straight after it he depicted for us *khi*, saying to us as follows: This letter which has four corners and four beginnings reveals to us the announcement of the four gospels of Christ, who was preached in the four sides of the world (59) after the ascension of Christ our God, that is the going up to heaven.

For this reason there are four bays in in this letter, that is the four parts which are in the course of the light of day.