

*So, you want  
to learn COPTIC?*

*A guide to Bohairic Grammar*



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*A guide to Bohairic Grammar*

Sameh Younan

**St. Mary, St.Bakhomious, and St.Shenouda  
Coptic Orthodox Church Kirawee**

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# FOREWORD

*By His Grace Bishop Daniel, Bishop of Sydney and Affiliated regions.*

How does one begin to explain the importance of Coptic to the life of the Church?

As a monk living in St. Anthony's monastery, I would share in the midnight praises, chanting the hymns in the same words and spirit as the fathers of the Church, whose written expression of their spiritual rejoicing have touched the hearts of many in the generations that followed. I would read the inscriptions on the precious icons illuminated by the candles lit through the humble petitions of the believers who venerated them. I would search through the ancient Coptic manuscripts in the library, whose ageing pages have borne the gaze of my fore fathers over hundreds of years.

Some would have no doubt been sceptical when the prophet Isaiah proclaimed "blessed is My people Egypt". For how could a powerful pagan nation, who revered their own human kings as gods, and who oppressed and enslaved the true people of God, ever become God's people? Yet God's people they became, as the rubble at Tel Basta has become a monument to the shattering of the idol statue before the face of the infant Christ, so did the Egyptian culture become ever transformed, bearing an eternal witness to the joy of the new Christians who had discovered freedom from the slavery of sin and the path to salvation. That phase of Egyptian life is now called Coptic, which has survived in some form in spite of neglect and even the concerted efforts of many to destroy it. It has passed from generation to generation, with the choices each generation making determining whether it would survive into the next.

Now it is our turn.

As a Bishop presiding over a region many thousands of kilometres removed from Egypt, it gives me great pleasure to see the efforts of this generation. Under the leadership of His Holiness Pope Shenouda, Coptic has continued to be taught in our Coptic schools and Theological College thanks to the dedicated efforts of our Church Fathers, teachers and lecturers. A more recent development has truly amazed all those who have come to cherish the Coptic language. Who would have thought that Macquarie University, a major Sydney university, would undertake to establish a course completely dedicated to the study of Coptic, at a time when many other faculties are undergoing considerable cut backs?

*So, You want to learn Coptic?*

The book you are now holding is a significant step in the revival of Coptic, written in an engaging and friendly style; it will make Coptic accessible to many who have not had the opportunity nor the means to understand the depths of their heritage.

There are some who have difficulty coming to grips with the Coptic culture, and in some ways find it even to be foreign. But perhaps through education and illumination, they will for themselves discover its hidden treasures.

Daniel  
With the Grace of God  
Bishop of Sydney & Affiliated Regions,  
Singapore, Thailand & Japan

## PREFACE

Sameh Younan's book "So you want to learn Coptic" is an introduction to Bohairic Coptic. Bohairic is a regional form (commonly called "dialect") which dominated the Egyptian-Coptic language after the most important dialect of the First Millennium CE, Sahidic Coptic, had lost its productive impetus. There is a rich literature in Bohairic Coptic preserving much of the fascinating heritage of Egyptian Christianity: Biblical translations, martyrdoms and other saints' lives, sermons and liturgical texts. Moreover, Bohairic Coptic is still of vital importance today as the liturgical language of the Coptic Church. Sameh Younan's goal is to provide an introduction to Bohairic Coptic especially for those with little previous familiarity with formal English grammar, who may be daunted by the terminology used in traditional grammars of the Coptic language. He achieves this by using a didactic approach which will certainly lower the threshold of worry for those wanting to learn Bohairic by self-study. The author is to be congratulated on his effort, which is certain to find a large resonance among readers interested in studying the wealth of Bohairic Coptic literature in the original.

Dr Heike Behlmer  
Lecturer in Coptic Studies  
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# INTRODUCTION

## What is Coptic anyway?

If you've ever been in the position of looking for a job, you've probably heard the saying "it's not what you know, but who you know." Something similar applies to asking "what is Coptic?", because the answer really does depend on who you ask almost as much as on what it actually is. An Egyptologist will tell you that Coptic is the last phase in the development of the language of Ancient Egypt, which had started with those familiar hieroglyphics. A New Testament scholar will tell you that Coptic was one of the first languages into which the New Testament was translated. Now it comes time to ask an indigenous Orthodox Christian coming from Egypt- other wise known as a Copt. Even here, you'll find the answer still depends on which Copt you ask. Say you speak to a typical tertiary educated Copt (i.e. either an engineer or a pharmacist). He could tell you it's the language used for those really long hymns - the ones no one understands. However, ask a few more Copts, dig a little deeper, and you will start to get quite a different answer. They will start to tell you that the Coptic language is part of their heritage and roots, and that it would be wonderful if Copts could speak it but it's a shame that scarcely anybody can. 'Heritage'? 'Roots'? These are big words, but what exactly do they mean, and if this language really is so important, what happened to it? For these answers we would turn to the history books, or at least to the paragraph below.

## The history and development of Coptic

Few subjects in school brought a lump to my throat as did year seven history. It was with great pride that I learnt about one of the greatest civilisations of all time; the pyramids, the sphinx, ridiculously large statues, Cleopatra, Aida, the setting for numerous Hollywood blockbusters; what other ancient civilisation had produced so many household names? (Apart from Greek, Roman and Chinese but let's not think about those). As every child in year seven knows, the Egyptians used to write in Hieroglyphics. All the Egyptian monuments are inscribed with hundreds of Hieroglyphics. Hieroglyphics was the written script of the language spoken by the Egyptians at that time, starting at about 3000 BC. As attractive as Hieroglyphics was to look at, it actually took quite a lot of effort to write. Each Hieroglyphic character represented a common object, they could represent the sound of the object, or an idea associated with the object. As you could imagine, this could lead to a lot of characters, in fact, Ancient Egyptian writing used more than 2000 characters. Now that's a lot to remember. No one knew this more than the pagan priests of the time, so they

developed another script which simplified the hieroglyphics so that they wouldn't take as long to draw. This parallel script was called hieratic.

Meanwhile, Hieroglyphics became exported to the Sea Faring Phoenicians (modern day Lebanese). They took the Hieroglyphic script, simplified it, and eventually passed it on to the Greeks who used it as the basis of their alphabet (which eventually became the basis for the English Alphabet).

By the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, even Hieratic was considered too laborious to write, so a new simpler and less attractive script was devised, which cut out about 90% of the hieroglyphics. This leaner and meaner script was called Demotic.

Times were changing on the international scene, as a new superpower began to emerge. Lead by Alexander the Great, Greek culture swept the world, and Egypt was no exception. Egypt was conquered by Greece in 313 BC, and became heavily influenced by Greek culture. The Greeks brought with them their alphabet which had originally come from Egypt, and which they were now about to give back to the Egyptians. Greek was very much the 'in culture', you had to be Greek to be seen. A crisis started to hit Egyptian pagan priests. Sales of magic amulets were an important revenue raiser, however sales had plummeted after people had stopped being able to read Demotic, as all the rich important people could only read Greek. The pagan priests at the time then decided to transliterate the spoken Egyptian language into Greek letters, adding some Demotic letters for sounds that didn't have a Greek equivalent. This new script was a hit, and started to spread to other applications.

At around 1300 BC, Egypt had a brief phase of Monotheism under the rule of Akhenaton, when they had worshipped the sun. Egypt was now to return to Monotheism, not to worship the sun, but to worship the "sun of righteousness"\*, the Lord Jesus Christ. After Saint Mark had completed his preaching mission, a growing number of Greek speaking, non Demotic reading missionaries came to Egypt to preach to the illiterate but spiritually hungry Egyptian speaking peasants. To meet them half way, the missionaries wrote their Greek texts into the Egyptian language using Greek letters. Unlike the pagan priests, they initially didn't use any Demotic letters, but later started to add them to the Greek alphabet, ending up with the script which we now call Coptic.

Coptic therefore became linked hand in hand with the Christianity of Egypt. It was the language which the common people of Egypt spoke. The Bible and other church writings were translated into Coptic, hymns were written in Coptic, and Abbots wrote to their monks in Coptic. The martyrs of Egypt, the Popes and the saints, spoke in Coptic, prayed and chanted in Coptic. Coptic was impossible to separate from Christianity in Egypt. It is therefore no surprise that by far the most prolific of Coptic writers was one of the great saints of the Church. St. Shenouda the Archimandrite of the

---

\* Malachi 4:2

white monastery took Coptic to new literary heights using his considerable rhetorical and linguistic skill.

Egypt was conquered by the Arabs in 642 AD. The Arab leaders began to force the Copts who worked in important government positions to learn Arabic. At times, persecution became more direct and violent, with Coptic being actively prohibited. Meanwhile, Coptic liturgical texts began to appear written along side Arabic translations. It was clear that Arabic had begun to proliferate in the Church. Young people no longer saw a need to learn this old language. One can imagine a youth with an attitude telling their parents “get with the times, this is the 1500's, we've got to look to the future, we can't be stuck with the boring old past.”

Slowly but surely, the Coptic language began to wither as a spoken language, probably dying by the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For the Egyptologist, the last enduring flame of the Ancient Egyptian language had been extinguished. For the Early Christian scholar, the real action was already over 1000 years before. For the Copts, an integral organ of their community had died.

Somewhat of a revival occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of Pope Cyril IV. He began a movement to educate the clergy in different Church teachings, which included Coptic language education. As part of this revival, Erian Mofteh was appointed to standardise the pronunciation of Coptic. With this intention, he consulted the current Greek pronunciation, presuming that it had retained the original pronunciation of many of the Coptic letters. Perhaps unknown to Mofteh, was the fact that Greek had itself undergone some changes in pronunciation under the reign of the Turks.

## **You mean there's more than one?**

At this point it should be understood that when we talk about ‘Coptic’ we really need to be aware of the particular *dialect* to which we are referring. What do I mean by dialect? Let's take English as an example. Compare the variations in language which an Englishman, an American and an Australian would speak. The accents are different, some words may differ in meaning, and there may be some minor changes in spelling (e.g. swapping ‘z’s for ‘s’s). By and large however, there would be no difficulty in the speakers of each understanding each other. Each of these variations is called a dialect. Whereas though there is scarcely little difference in written form between the English dialects, the variations in Coptic dialect are much larger. For example, one dialect has an extra letter, variations in spelling are the rule rather than the exception, and there are many words which are peculiar to only one dialect. It is likely that the Copts speaking the more different dialects would have had great difficulty understanding each other.

There were 5 major dialects used, but there were as many as 12 altogether, including the less common ones. The dialect which was spoken by a particular Copt depended largely on where he lived. Starting north in the Nile Delta, where Alexandria and Cairo are today, we find Bohairic. Travelling south we come to Fayum, where

Fayumic was spoken, followed by Lycopolitan of Asyut, then the Akhmin of middle Egypt which had Akhminic, and finally Sahidic of Upper Egypt. It was this dialect which became the mostly widely used, the dialect which Saint Shenouda used for his writings and indeed the dialect in which the official Church translation of the Bible was made. The Nile Delta however had the rich heritage of the Wadi Natrun monasteries, which kept the Bohairic dialect alive even as Arabic became more and more dominant. When the Church moved its official headquarters from Alexandria to Cairo, Bohairic became the official dialect of the Church, and it is this dialect which would be recognised by Copts today as being ‘Coptic.’ This creates a bit of a dilemma at times, because although Bohairic is the dialect which most Copts would be interested in, Sahidic is the one in which those Egyptologists and New Testament scholars have greater interest, especially when a large number of Gnostic texts were found in this dialect in the Nag Hammadi. As a result, the greater part of the Grammatical aids and published texts of the Western world are in Sahidic. In Egypt however, as you would imagine, nearly all Coptic resources are in Bohairic.

## **Where are we now?**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Coptic remains an unspoken language. Liturgy books are frequently published with either no Coptic or Coptic transliterated into a modern language. On the other hand, there continues to be an interest in learning Coptic among certain members of the community. New advances in technology, in particular the internet, have allowed access to resources which were otherwise inaccessible to all but the most devoted academics. In the West, those very same Egyptologists and Early Christian scholars have devoted a great deal of time to the research and publication of Coptic resources, notable examples being Crum’s “Coptic Dictionary”, Stern’s “Koptisch Grammatik:” and more recently, Layton’s “A Coptic Grammar.” Meanwhile, the Coptic Orthodox Church has had a revival under the leadership of her last two patriarchs, Pope Cyril VI and Pope Shenouda III. The Copts in the Diaspora have been able to provide a wealth of resources under the freedom and prosperity of their newly adopted homes, and with that a new interest in Coptic by youths keen to discover their identity.

What is Coptic? In the book of Acts, we read that the handkerchief of St.Paul, a plain ordinary piece of cloth, was able to provide healing to those who touched it in faith<sup>†</sup>. Its mere presence before the Saint was enough to impart this blessing; the grace of Saint Paul could not be separated from the garments in which he lived. Coptic is the handkerchief which wiped the brow of the suffering martyrs who endured towards their heavenly reward; it is the relic bearing the everlasting impression of the lives of those

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<sup>†</sup> Acts 19:12

who lived and breathed it, and it is the handkerchief infused with the fragrance of the sweet smelling aroma of the sacrifice of the first Christians of the Church.

Coptic is our link to the fathers of our Church, and is hence an invaluable treasure of our past. I pray that it will continue to be so for our present and our future.

## Abbreviations

<i>AmBal</i> = Balestri et. H. <i>Hyvernat</i> “Acta <i>Martyrum</i> ”vol 1 Paris 1907	<i>imp</i> = imperative <i>infl.</i> = inflected <i>interj</i> = interjection <i>interrog.</i> =interrogative <i>m</i> = masculine noun <i>no</i> = number <i>Obj</i> =object <i>P</i> = person <i>part</i> =particle <i>p.noun</i> =pronoun <i>pfx</i> =prefix <i>pl</i> = plural <i>Poss</i> = possessive <i>poss. noun</i> = possessed noun <i>prep</i> = preposition	<i>pronom</i> =pronominal <i>prop.noun</i> = proper noun <i>q</i> = qualitative form <i>rfx</i> = reflexive verb <i>s</i> = singular <i>S.Pachomii vita</i> =Lefort.L “S.Pachomii Vita- Bohairice scripta) Paris 1925 <i>Sin.Arch</i> = Leipoldt, Iohannes “Sinuthii Archimandritae vita et opera omnia” Otto Harrassowitz 1906 <i>v.i</i> = intransitive verb <i>v.t</i> = transitive verb <i>v</i> = see <i>vb</i> = verb
<i>AmHyp</i> = Hyvernat, Henri “Les Actes des Martyr de L’Egypte	<i>adj</i> = adjective <i>adv</i> = adverb <i>art</i> = article <i>comp</i> = compound <i>conj</i> = conjunction <i>dem</i> = demonstrative <i>f</i> = feminine noun <i>Gk</i> = word of Greek origin <i>Heb</i> = Hebrew <i>hom. vat ii</i> = De vis, Henris “Homélies Coptes de la vaticane” vol. II Hauniae 1929	

Note: - two references are given for each Psalm. The first in bold refers to the Septuagint reference, while the second refers to that of the Masoretic texts.

## 1. LEARNING TO READ

The first step in learning any language is learning to pronounce the letters. It would obviously be easier to learn a language like French or German which uses the same letters as English than it would be to learn Hebrew or Chinese. Coptic falls somewhere in between. Although it does not use a Latin based alphabet, many of the letters will look quite familiar and some will also share the same pronunciation in Coptic as they do in English.

Note that the pronunciation guide presented here is based on the modern ecclesiastical pronunciation. Recent research pioneered by Emil Maher (now Father Shenouda Maher) has suggested that the original Bohairic dialect may have been pronounced differently to the current pronunciation. That form of pronunciation is called *Old Bohairic*.

A brief reference will be made to the Old Bohairic pronunciation, however the major emphasis will be put on the modern pronunciation.

### 1.1. The Coptic alphabet

Coptic was the final stage of development of the ancient Egyptian language spoken since the time of the Pharaohs. Its earliest written form was Hieroglyphics. This later evolved to Hieratic then subsequently to Demotic. At some stage around the beginning of the first Millennium, the Coptic script was transcribed into the Greek alphabet. Hence the first 24 letters are imported directly from Greek.

After the 5<sup>th</sup> Greek letter, a Coptic letter ⲉ̅ was added. This does not appear in any words and only ever appears as a number.

In the Bohairic dialect, another 7 letters of Demotic origin were added to the end of the alphabet to make up for sounds that have no equivalent in Greek, leaving a total of 32 letters. The letters are shown in the table below, with more explanation about each in the sections that follow.

*So, You want to learn Coptic?*

Letter	Name	Pronun.	Letter	Name	Pronun.
Α α	Alpha	a	Π π	Pe	p
Β β	Vita	b,v	Ρ ρ	Ro	r
Γ γ	Gamma	g,gh,n	Σ σ	Seema	s
Δ δ	Delta	d, th	Τ τ	Tav	t
Ε ε	Eey	e	Υ υ	Epsilon	i
Ϛ ϛ	So-ou	-	Φ φ	Phi	f
Ζ ζ	Zeeta	z	Χ χ	Key	k, sh, kh
Η η	Eeta	ee	Ψ ψ	Epsi	eps
Θ θ	Theta	th, t	Ω ω	Omega	au
Ι ι	Yota	i	Ϙ ϙ	Shai	sh
Κ κ	Kappa	k	ϣ ϛ	Fai	f
Λ λ	Lola	l	ϥ Ϧ	Khai	kh
Μ μ	Mey	m	Ϩ ϩ	Hori	h
Ν ν	Ney	n	Ϫ ϫ	Jenja	j, g
Ξ ξ	Exi	x	Ϭ ϭ	Cheema	ch
Ο ο	O	o	ϰ ϱ	Ti	ti



## 1.2. Vowels

What is a vowel? If you cast your mind back to Kindergarten, you'll remember the English vowels being a, e, i, o, u. Ever wondered why they were called vowels? I never did till I started learning Coptic. According to people "in the know", vowels are letters you say without closing any part of your mouth. Try it. The other letters are consonants, that require you to close part of your mouth while pronouncing the letter. You'll notice that there are scarcely any words that don't have any vowels (I can't think of any myself, but I'm sure that if I said that then somebody would find one). In fact, you can scarcely say more than two consonants in a row without needing a vowel.

Anyway, naturally Coptic also has vowels whose names and pronunciation are shown in the table below:

<b>Ⲁ</b> ⲁ	<b>Alpha</b> , "a" as in "art"
<b>Ⲣ</b> Ⲅ	<b>Ey</b> , "e" as in "let"
<b>Ⲭ</b> ⲭ	<b>Eeta</b> "ee" as in "feet"
<b>Ⲓ</b> ⲓ, <b>Ⲓ</b> ⲓ	<b>Iota, Epsilon</b> both "i" as in "sit"
<b>Ⲑ</b> ⲑ	<b>o</b> "o" as in "stop"
<b>ⲑⲓ</b>	"ou" as in "soup"
<b>Ⲩ</b> ⲩ	<b>Omega</b> "au" as in "baud"

Two things are worth noticing here, the first is that the **Ⲓ** and **ⲓ** are both pronounced the same. The second is that the same **ⲓ** appears twice in the table. The first time on its own, then two vowels down as a part of the combination vowel **ⲑⲓ**. The combination vowel has a different pronunciation to what you'd get if you simply added the combination of both the **Ⲑ** and the **ⲓ**. **ⲓ** is pronounced differently again if its preceded by **Ⲣ** or **Ⲁ**. The different sounds **ⲓ** makes when combined with different letters are summarised in the table below:

<b>Ⲁⲓ</b>	"av" is "have"
<b>Ⲣⲓ</b>	"ev" as in "bev"
<b>Ⲑⲓ</b>	"ou" as in "soup"
<b>ⲓ</b>	"i" if not preceded by any of the above

*So, You want to learn Coptic?*

## Old Bohairic variations

Most of the vowels have a similar pronunciation, however **ϵ** seems to have been pronounced more like **ⲁ** , as ‘a’ in ‘fat’ or ‘far.’

### 1.3. Consonants

As English readers, we should be grateful that some of the Coptic consonants look and sound so similar to their English counterparts. Some of these are shown with some of the other more common consonants below.

<b>Ⲙ</b> <b>ⲙ</b>	<b>Mey</b> , pronounced ‘m’ as in ‘man’
<b>Ⲛ</b> <b>ⲛ</b>	<b>Ney</b> , pronounced ‘n’ as in ‘net’
<b>Ⲕ</b> <b>ⲕ</b>	<b>Kappa</b> , pronounced ‘k’ as in ‘kite’
<b>Ⲗ</b> <b>ⲛ</b>	<b>Tav</b> “t” pronounced as in ‘net’ <sup>‡</sup>
<b>Ⲙ</b> <b>ⲙ</b>	<b>Seema</b> , pronounced “s” as in ‘sit’ <sup>§</sup>
<b>Ⲛ</b> <b>ⲛ</b>	<b>Pe</b> , pronounced “p” as in ‘put’
<b>Ⲕ</b> <b>ⲕ</b>	<b>Ro</b> , pronounced ‘r’ as in ‘rat’
<b>Ⲗ</b> <b>ⲛ</b>	<b>Sh</b> , pronounced ‘sh’ as in ‘shut.’
<b>Ⲙ</b> <b>ⲙ</b>	<b>Chima</b> , pronounced ‘tch’ as in ‘church’
<b>Ⲕ</b> <b>ⲕ</b>	<b>Zeeta</b> , pronounced ‘z’ as in ‘zoo’

**Old Bohairic variations:** According to Old Bohairic proponents, **Ⲛ** was pronounced as ‘b’ and **Ⲗ** was usually pronounced as ‘d’, as in ‘duck’, though sometimes as ‘t’ as in ‘tide.’ Some examples:

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<sup>‡</sup> There is a case where the pronunciation of these letters varies which shall be discussed later on in this chapter.

<sup>§</sup> as above

<b>ΜΕΝ</b>	men
<b>ΤΕΝ</b>	ten
<b>ΤΟΠΟΣ</b>	topos
<b>ΠΟΥ</b>	pou
<b>ΚΑΤΑ</b>	kata

Now try to pronounce the following words:

*Exercise 1.1*

<b>ΝΑΝ</b>	
<b>ΝΑΙ</b>	
<b>ΜΗΤ</b>	
<b>ΠΑΙ</b>	
<b>ΜΑΥ</b>	
<b>ΤΑΙ</b>	
<b>ΜΟΥ</b>	
<b>ΖΩΟΝ</b>	
<b>ΤΩΝ</b>	

Now we'll look at some more consonants that have only one pronunciation:

<b>Ξ ξ</b>	“x”
<b>Χ χ</b>	“kh” (‘ch’ as in German ‘Buch’)
<b>Ψ ψ</b>	“ebs”
<b>Φ φ</b>	“ph” as in phone**

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\*\* Some people consider this letter to be also pronounced as ‘v.’ They say it is pronounced as ‘ph’ in all words of Greek origin as well as Coptic proper nouns, and as ‘v’ in all Coptic words apart from proper nouns.

*So, You want to learn Coptic?*

ϣ ϣ	“P” as in fan
ϥ ϥ	“h” as in “hat”
ϥ ϥ	“ti” as in “tick”
λ λ	“l” as in lake

### *The jenkem*

Now seems like a good time to introduce the jenkem. The jenkem is a little stroke that seems to appear all over the place. It looks like this: `

You’ll see it appear in front of both consonants and vowels. When you see it come over a consonant, it is pronounced like an ‘e’ before the consonant.

E.g. ⲉⲙⲙⲟⲛ is pronounced “emmon.”

If it comes before a vowel, it places a stress on the vowel.

E.g. when pronouncing ⲁⲛⲟⲕ, you put a gap between the ⲁ and the rest of the word, so it’s pronounced ‘a-nok’.

**Old Bohairic variations:** According to the Old Bohairic pronunciation, ⲡ was pronounced as ‘b.’ Also, Ⲫ was pronounced as ‘ph’ or as ‘b.’

Some more examples:

ϣⲁⲣⲟⲛ	sharon
ϣⲁⲓ	shai
ϣⲁⲓ	fai
ⲡⲁⲧⲏⲣ	pateer
ⲉⲓⲧⲣ	chitf

Now try the following words:

*Exercise 1.2*

ⲛⲏⲗⲟⲥ	
ⲛⲏⲣⲟⲥ	

ⲉⲣⲗⲟⲛ	
ⲉⲟⲩ	
ⲱⲁⲗⲓⲛ	
ⲃⲉⲛ	
ⲃⲁ	
ⲩⲱⲟⲩⲣⲏ	

How do you feel so far? You've now mastered 24 out of the 35 letters. By now you should be able to pronounce most words with little difficulty. Admittedly the letters to follow are a little more complicated, but you're well on the way to being able to read Coptic.

### *1.3.i. Consonants with varying pronunciations*

Unfortunately, some consonants change their pronunciation depending on the letters around them. Before you start complaining, remember that English also has letters which change their pronunciation, and for no apparent reason. Consider 'g' for instance, sometimes it's a hard 'g', some times it's like 'j', and sometimes it's pronounced as 'f' if followed by an 'h.' At least Coptic rules have some consistency. Anyway, to start with, let's look at the first of these letters:

## **B β Vita**

This letter has two pronunciations: 'b' and 'v'  
 In names of places and people (proper nouns), it's always 'b'  
 In words which are not names, it's 'v' if followed by a vowel, but 'b' if it's followed by a consonant.

For example, **βⲱⲕ** is not a name, the **β** is followed by a vowel, so the word is pronounced 'vauk'.

**ⲁβⲣⲁⲁⲙ** on the other hand is a name, so the **β** is pronounced as 'b', and the word is abra-am.

Now how can you tell if a word is a proper noun? It's not as hard as you might think, as most of the proper nouns you'll come across will be recognisable as being similar to those in English, as with the **ⲁβⲣⲁⲁⲙ** example above.

*So, You want to learn Coptic?*

Now try the following words:

*Exercise 1.3*

ⲉⲱⲃ	
ⲃⲁⲗ	
ⲛⲟⲃⲓ	
ⲏⲛⲟⲩⲃ	
ⲃⲱⲉⲱ	
ⲗⲱⲃⲱ	
ⲉⲃⲟⲗ	
ⲛⲓⲃⲉⲛ	

**Old Bohairic variation:** B is considered to be pronounced as either ‘b’ or ‘w.’

## ⲗ   ⲗ   Delta

Delta is pronounced as a hard ‘th’ as in “this” in all common nouns, but is pronounced as ‘d’ in proper nouns.

Examples:

ⲗⲉ	the
ⲓⲗⲱⲗⲉⲛ	ithaulen
ⲗⲟⲗⲁ	thoxa
ⲗⲓⲕⲉⲟⲥ	thikeos
ⲗⲁⲩⲓⲗ	david

**Old Bohairic variation:** Those who use the Old Bohairic pronunciation always pronounce ⲗ as ‘d.’