Introduction

The Coptic (Egyptian) language is the fourth and final development of the ancient Egyptian language of the hieroglyphics. Much of the Scriptures and Christian literature at the time were translated into Coptic. During the tenure of the famous Pantaenus, dean of the Catechetical School of Alexandria in 190 A.D., the language evolved into its final stage as the standardized written grammatical, alphabetical and numerical linguistic system which is essentially the same as it is to this present day. Rich in breadth and depth, 2nd century Coptic scholars (Pantaenus and his disciples) translated the Holy Bible from its original Hebrew and Greek to Coptic.

Soon it became the official language of Egypt as well as the language of the Church.

As a matter of fact, the Coptic language was the real key to the deciphering of the Hieroglyphic and Demotic scripts by Champollion, who unlocked the secrets of the Rosetta stone.

Facilitating the Development of Writing System

The rapid development of the Egyptian writing system was facilitated by their discovery of methods to make paper and ink. Walter A. Fairservis, Jr. in his book *Egypt; Gift of the Nile* 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 marshes 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 want.” Donald Jackson in his book *The Story of Writing* also affirms 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 bases of most handwritten communication today.”

Source of Western Alphabet
The Egyptians developed the Hieroglyphic Writing around 3000 B.C. 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. Around 700 B.C., Demotic writing was developed. This was simpler and faster to write than the Hieratic. The scribes used it for correspondence and record keeping.

Around 1500 B.C., the Semites developed an alphabet which is based on the Egyptian Hieroglyphic system. The Phoenicians, one of the Semitic peoples perfected an alphabet around 1000 B.C. The Greek alphabet, which is the progenitor of Roman (Latin) letters, was directly derived from the Phoenician alphabet. The Greeks not only took the forms of letters, they also took over some Phoenician names for the letters.

Based on the above-mentioned facts, the English alphabet of today can be traced back to the sign writing of ancient Egypt. Barbara Mertz stated that, “The birds and the bees of the ancient Egyptian script may have a more direct relationship to our own alphabet than we realize.”

In his book, *Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, Davies cites a quote by Gardiner describing this observation, “The Hieroglyphs lives on though in transmuted form within our own alphabet.”

Origin of Coptic Letters

There are 32 letters in the Coptic alphabet. The first 25 are modified from the Greek letters that have their origin in the Egyptian Hieroglyphic script.

The last seven letters are a modification from the Egyptian Demotic script.

The diagram above illustrates the evolution of the language.

**Contribution of the Coptic Alphabet**
The current alphabet of the Russian language is known as the Cyrillic Alphabet. It was invented by St. Cyril (826-869 A.D.) and St. Methodius (815-884 A.D.), 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 燊 (written as III) into the Russian Alphabet that is still used in Russia today.

**Usage of Greek Words**

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 (Ecumenical) councils. Many of the Coptic Church fathers e.g. St. Athanasius, our 20th Pope, wrote mainly in Greek so people worldwide 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 started his ministry in Egypt, Greek was the language used by St. Mark and it was the language of the Liturgy that He handed down to his successors. When the Liturgy was later translated from Greek to Coptic, the Church kept some Greek words and expressions, and the Copts were very familiar with the meaning of these words. However, there is about less than 10% Greek words in the Liturgy and praises now.

Cyrus Gordon, in his book, “Forgotten Scripts”, states that, “The Coptic Church still preserves the native Egyptian language written in Greek characters, therefore, we have an unbroken tradition of Egyptian texts spanning about five thousand years.”

**Importance of Coptic Language**

1. It was the spoken language in Egypt until the 11th century (in some areas of Upper Egypt until the 17th century) when it was
gradually replaced by Arabic.

2. It was the language that Jesus, as a baby visiting Egypt with St. Mary and St. Joseph, heard and spoke. We feel that our old land and language were blessed by this visit.

3. The Bible was translated to the Coptic language around the 2nd century by the scholars of the famous School of Alexandria. They were very fluent in both Greek and Coptic. Therefore the Coptic translation is considered one of the most reliable and accurate translations available.

4. The original writings of several early church fathers were in Coptic as St. Anthony and St. Shenouda the Archimandrite.

5. The majority of the Church hymns are in Coptic. It is almost impossible to sing a translated hymn, from Coptic to any other language, using the same Coptic music written for it. 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."

6. It still lives on in the hundreds of words in the Arabic dialect spoken now a day in Egypt.

_Coptic Language in recent times_

Coptic language education was offered in all schools, built by St. Cyril IV, Patriarch of Alexandria in the 19th century, alongside the other curricula.
In every Coptic Theological Seminary, as well as many universities worldwide, you will find a lot of attention paid to Coptic studies (Coptology). Coptic manuscripts are considered valuable treasures, people study them since, on the one hand they are considered one of the oldest and most accurate manuscripts we currently have for the Bible, and on the other hand, other non-biblical manuscripts paint a vivid picture of the life of the early church in Egypt and the culture of that time.