

THERE is a difference of opinion as to what nation belongs the honor of the invention of the art of handwriting. Sir Isaac Newton observes:

"There is the utmost uncertainty in the chronology of ancient kingdoms, arising from the vanity of each claiming the greatest antiquity, while those pretensions were favoured by their having no exact account of time."

Its antiquity has been exhaustively treated by many writers; the best known are Massey, 1763, *The Origin and Progress of Letters*;" Astle, 1803, "The Origin and Progress of Writing;" Silvestre, "Universal Palaeography," Paris, 1839-41 ; and Humphreys, 1855, "The Origin and Progress of the Art of Writing." They, with others, have sought to record the origin and gradual development of the art of writing from the Egyptian Hieroglyphics of 4000 B. C.; the Chinese Figurative, 3000 B. C. ; Indian Alphabetic, 2000 or more B. C. ; the Babylonian or Cuneiform, 2000 years B. C.; and the Phoenician in which they include the Hebrew or Samaritan Alphabet, 2000 or more B. C., down to the writings of the new or Western world of the Christian era.

The data presented and the arguments set forth, deserve profound respect, and though we find some favoring the Egyptians, or the Phoenicians, the Chaldeans, the Syrians, the Indians, the Persians or the Arabians, it is best to accept the consensus of their opinion, which seems to divide between the Phoenicians and the Egyptians as being the inventors of the foremost of all the arts. "For, in Phoenicia, had lived Taaut or Thoth the first Hermes, its inventor, and who later carried his art into Egypt where they first wrote in pictures, some 2200 years B. C."

The art appears to have been first exercised in Greece and the West about 1500 or 1800 B. C., and like all arts, it was doubtless slow and progressive. The Greeks refer the invention of written letters to Cadmus, merely because he introduced them from Phoenicia, then only sixteen in number. To these, four more were added by Simonides. Evander brought letters into Latium from Greece, the Latin letters being at first nearly the same form as the Greek. The Romans employed a device of scattering green sand upon tables, for the teaching of arithmetic and writing, and in India a "sand box" consisting of a surface of sand laid on a board the finger being utilized to trace forms, was the method followed by the natives to teach their children. It is said that such methods still obtain even in this age, in some rural districts of England.

After the invention of writing well-informed nations and individuals kept scribes or chroniclers to record in writing, historical and other events, mingled with claims of antiquity based on popular legends.

These individuals were not always held in the highest esteem. Among the Hebrews it was considered an honorable vocation, while the Greeks for a long time treated its practitioners as outcasts. It was an accomplishment possessed by the few even down to the fifteenth century of the Christian era. The rulers of the different countries were deficient in the art and depended on others to write their documents and letters to which they appended their monogram or the sign of the Cross against their names as an attestation. So late as A. D. 1516 an order was made in London to examine all persons who could write in order to discover the authorship of a seditious document.

The art of writing is not mentioned in the Bible prior to the time of Moses, although as before stated, in Egypt and the countries adjacent thereto it was not only known but practiced.

Its first mention recorded in Scripture will be found in Exodus xvii. v. 14; "And the Lord said unto Moses, Write this, for a memorial, in a book; and rehearse it in the ear of Joshua; for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." This command was given immediately after the defeat of the Amalekites near Horeb, and before the arrival of the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

It is observable, that there is not the least hint to induce us to believe that writing was then newly invented; on the contrary, we may conclude, that Moses understood what was meant by writing in a book; otherwise God would have instructed him, as he had done Noah in building the Ark; for he would not have been commanded to write in a book, if he had been ignorant of the art of writing; but Moses expressed no difficulty of comprehension when he received this command. We also find that Moses wrote all the works and all the judgments of the Lord, contained in the twenty-first and the two succeeding chapters of the book of Exodus, before the two written tables of stone were even so much as promised. The delivery of the tables is not mentioned till the eighteenth verse of the thirty-first chapter, after God had made an end of communing with him upon the mount, though the ten commandments were promulgated immediately after his third descent.

Moses makes frequent mention of ancient books of the Hebrews, but describes none, except the two tables on which God wrote the ten commandments. These he tells us, were of polished stone, engraven on both sides and as Calmet remarks: "it is probable that Moses would not have observed to us these two particulars so often as he does, were it not to distinguish them from other books, which were made of tables, not of stone, but of wood and curiously engraven, but on one side only."

It cannot be said that Moses uses any language which can be construed to mean the employment of rolls of papyrus, or barks of trees, much less of parchment. We have therefore reason to believe that by the term book, he always means table-books, made of small thin boards or plates.

The edicts, as well as the letters of kings, were written upon tablets and sent to the various provinces, sealed with their signets. Scripture plainly alludes to the custom of sealing up letters, edicts and the tablets on which the prophets wrote their visions.

The practice of writing upon rolls made of the barks of trees is very ancient. It is alluded to in the Book of Job: "Oh! that mine adversary had written a book; surely I would take it upon my shoulders, and bind it as a crown to me." (Old version.) The new one runs: "And that I had the indictment which mine adversary hath written!" The rolls, or volumes, generally speaking, were written upon one side only. This is intimated by Ezekiel who observes that he saw one of in extraordinary form written on both sides: "And when I looked, behold, an Hand was sent unto me, and lo! a roll of a book was therein; and he spread it before me, and it was written within and without."

Plato, who lived B. C. 350, expresses his views of the importance of writing in his imaginary colloquy between Thamus, king of Egypt, and Thoth, the god of the liberal arts of the Egyptians; he acquaints us:

"That the discourse turned upon letters. Thoth maintained the value of Writing, as capable of making the People wiser, increasing the powers of Memory; to this the king dissented, and expressed his opinion that by the exercise of this Art the multitude would appear to be knowing of those things of which they were really ignorant, possessing only an idea of Wisdom, instead of Wisdom itself."

—from *Forty Centuries of Ink* by David N. Carvalho