THE GENESIS OF THE WRITTEN

THE NEW ERA
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We have all grown up in a world nurtured on the comfortable Victorian doctrine of uniformitarianism, the idea that what happens in this world is all just more of the same: what lies ahead is pretty much what lies behind, for the same forces that are at work on the earth today were at work in the same manner, with the same intensity and the same effects, at all times past and will go on operating inexorably and irresistibly in just the same way forever hereafter. There is no real cause for alarm in a world where everything is under control beneath the watchful eye of science as evolution takes its undeviating forward course, steady, sure, reliable, imperceptibly slow and gentle, and gratifyingly predictable.

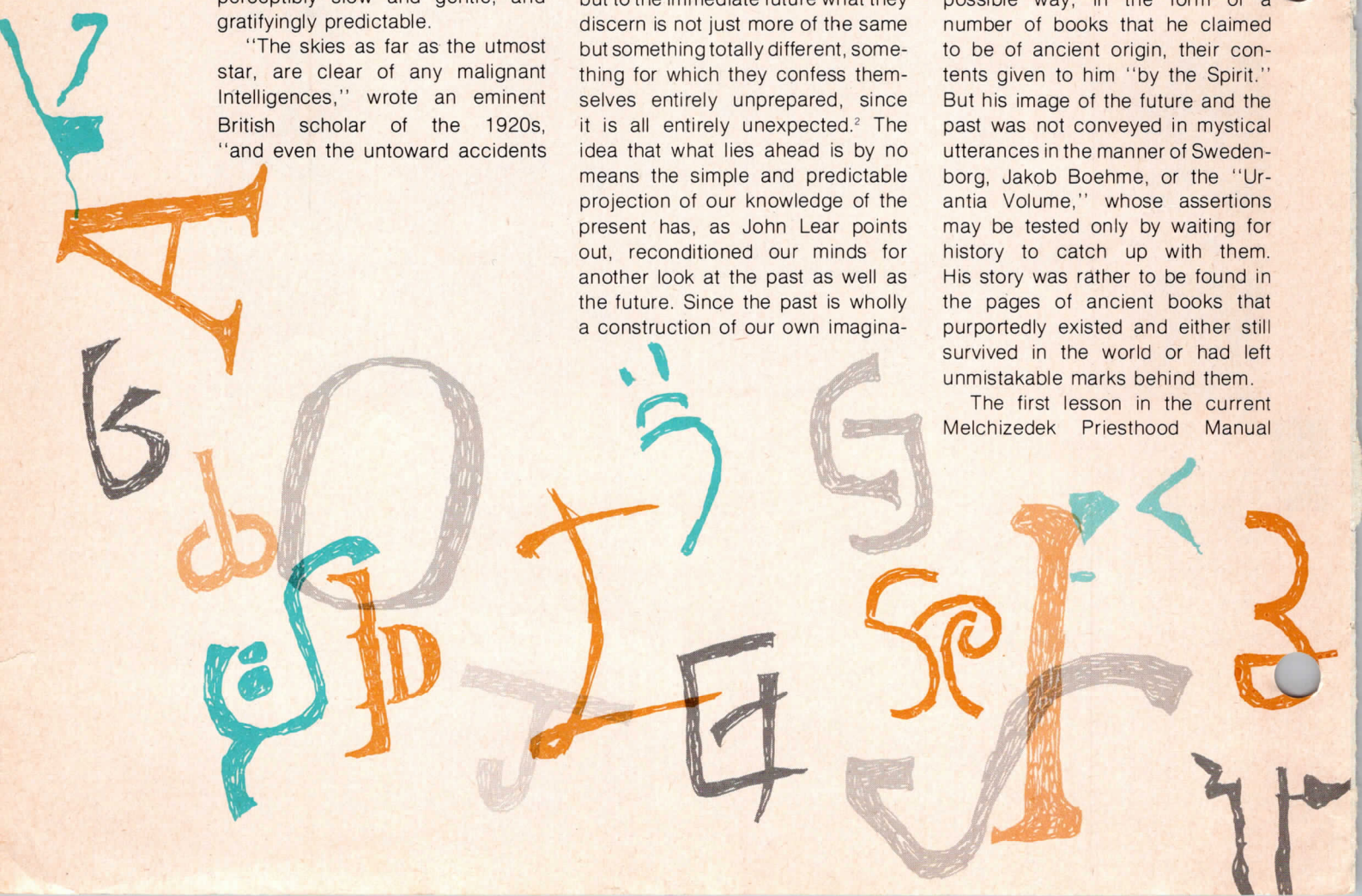
"The skies as far as the utmost star, are clear of any malignant Intelligences," wrote an eminent British scholar of the 1920s, "and even the untoward accidents of life are due to causes comfortably impersonal. . . . The possibility that the Unknown contains Powers deliberately hostile to him is one the ordinary modern man can hardly entertain even in imagination."[1]

In such a world one needed no longer to run to God for comfort. The matter-of-fact, no-nonsense approach of science had, since the days of the Miletian school and the ancient Atomists, banished all childish fears and consigned the horrendous and spectacular aspects of the human past and future to the realm of myth and fantasy.

Quite recently, however, scientists have noted with a shock that in looking forward not to the distant but to the immediate future what they discern is not just more of the same but something totally different, something for which they confess themselves entirely unprepared, since it is all entirely unexpected.[2] The idea that what lies ahead is by no means the simple and predictable projection of our knowledge of the present has, as John Lear points out, reconditioned our minds for another look at the past as well as the future. Since the past is wholly a construction of our own imaginations, we have always found there just what we expected to find, i.e., more of the same. But now "future shock" has prepared us for "past shock," and we find ourselves almost forced to accept a view of the past that is utterly alien to anything in the experience of modern man.[3]

Joseph Smith as a prophet also looked both ahead and behind and came up with a picture of both worlds that violently shocked and offended his Victorian contemporaries. He presented his peculiar picture of the past in the most daring possible way, in the form of a number of books that he claimed to be of ancient origin, their contents given to him "by the Spirit." But his image of the future and the past was not conveyed in mystical utterances in the manner of Swedenborg, Jakob Boehme, or the "Urantia Volume," whose assertions may be tested only by waiting for history to catch up with them. His story was rather to be found in the pages of ancient books that purportedly existed and either still survived in the world or had left unmistakable marks behind them.

The first lesson in the current Melchizedek Priesthood Manual



WORD

by Hugh W. Nibley

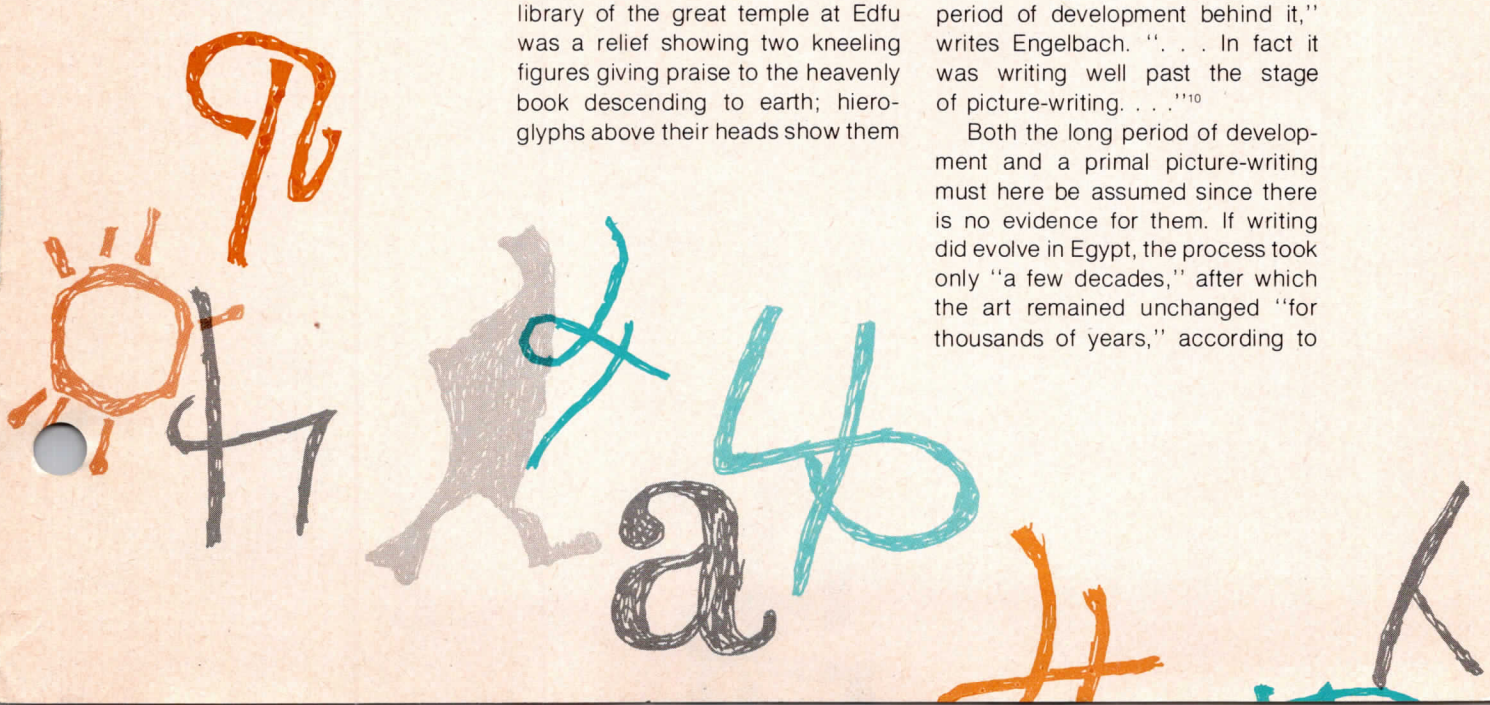
brings this formidable contribution to our attention. "The Latter-day Saints are doubly blessed," writes President Joseph Fielding Smith, "with the word of the Lord which has come to light through the restoration of the gospel. We have been given the records of the Nephites and the Jaredites. . . . The Lord restored much that had been originally revealed to Adam and Enoch and Abraham . . . and it is to their condemnation when members of the Church do not take advantage of their opportunities to read, study, and learn what the records contain."[4]

Few people realize that in Joseph Smith's day *no* really ancient manuscripts were known. Egyptian and Babylonian could not be read; the oldest literature available was the Greek and Latin classics, preserved almost entirely in bad Medieval copies no older than the Byzantine and Carolingian periods. The oldest text of the Hebrew Bible was the "Ben Asher Codex" from the tenth century A.D. Today we have whole libraries of documents more than 4,000 years old—not just their contents, but the actual writings themselves going back to the very beginnings of civilization. It is just as easy to dig back 6,000 years as it is to remove the dust of 5,000 years; and when we do so, what do we find in the way of written documents? Let us consider three main points: (1) what can be inferred from Joseph Smith's statements as to the nature of the oldest human records, (2) what the ancients themselves have to say about those records, and (3) what the actual condition of the records indicates.

First, if Joseph Smith is right, the written records should be as old as the human race itself, for, he tells us, "a book of remembrance was kept . . . in the language of Adam." (Moses 6:5.)[5] Now what do the ancients themselves have to say on the subject? Surprisingly, a great deal, of which we can give only a few quotations here. According to them, the King had access to that divine book that was consulted at the time of the creation of the world: "I am a scribe of the god's book," says one of the earliest Pharaohs, "who says what is and brings about what is not. . . ."[6] A later but still ancient (13th Dynasty) Pharaoh recalls, "My heart yearned to behold the most ancient books of Atum. Open them before me for diligent searching, that I may know god as he really is!"[7] Over the lintel of the ancient library of the great temple at Edfu was a relief showing two kneeling figures giving praise to the heavenly book descending to earth; hieroglyphs above their heads show them to represent *Sia* and *Hw*, or the Divine Intelligence and the Divine Utterance (the Word) by which the world was created.[8] In Egypt every step of the founding of a new temple had to follow the prescriptions given in the heavenly book since such a founding represented and dramatized the creation of the earth itself.[9]

And what does the actual state of the documents attest? If writing evolved gradually and slowly as everything is supposed to have done, there should be a vast accumulation of transitional scribblings as countless crude and stumbling attempts at writing would leave their marks on stone, bone, clay, and wood over countless millennia of groping trial and error. Only there are no such accumulations of primitive writing anywhere. Primitive writing is as illusive as that primitive language the existence of which has never been attested. And indeed, the very nature of writing precludes anything in the way of a slow, gradual, step-by-step evolution: one either catches on to how it is done or one does not, and once one knows, the whole mystery lies revealed. All the evidence shows that that is the way it actually was. "Suddenly . . . graves in the predynastic cemeteries" display "the art of writing . . . with a fairly long period of development behind it," writes Engelbach. ". . . In fact it was writing well past the stage of picture-writing. . . ."[10]

Both the long period of development and a primal picture-writing must here be assumed since there is no evidence for them. If writing did evolve in Egypt, the process took only "a few decades," after which the art remained unchanged "for thousands of years," according to



Capart.[11] Sir Alan Gardiner notes the same strange and paradoxical state of affairs: hieroglyphic "was a thing of rapid growth," but "once established remained immutable for fully 3,000 years."[12] So also A. Scharff assures us that with the First Dynasty "writing was introduced and perfected (*ausgebildet*) with astounding speed and detail."[13] "There is no evidence of a *gradual* development of script in Egypt," writes Miss Baugartel,[14] and yet there is no evidence of that script anywhere else.

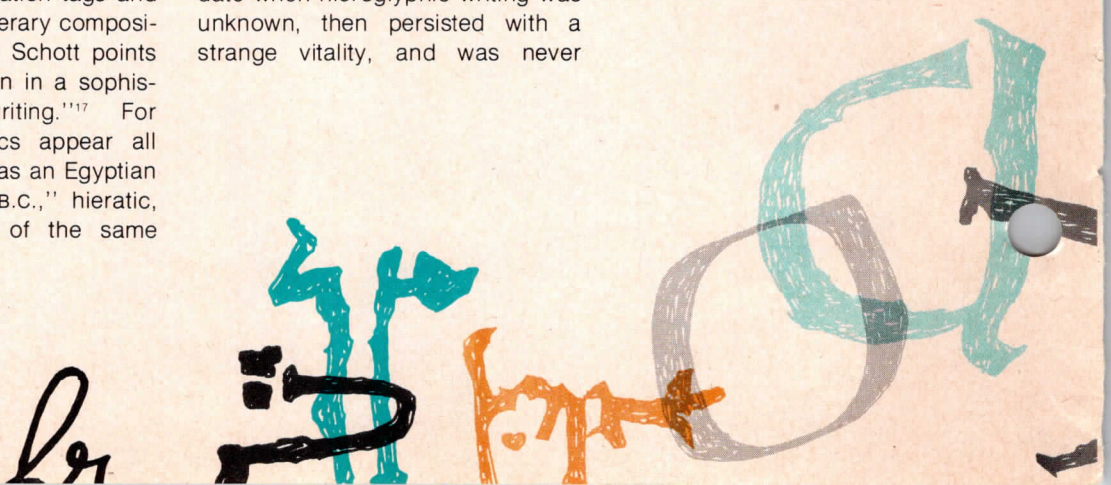
There is something wrong with this evolutionary process by which one and the same people develop a system of writing almost overnight, and then refuse to budge an inch on the way of progress forever after. Stuart Piggott finds that *immediately* after "ambiguous stammerings . . . in the slate palettes . . . a rapid cursive form of writing with pen and ink" is in evidence.[15] Stranger still, on the most famous of those predynastic slate palettes with their ambiguous stammerings that suggest only the dawn of writing, we see clearly depicted a King (Narmer) following behind an attendant (*tt*) who is carrying the classic two inkpots of the Egyptian scribe! The tombs of the First Dynasty "show that they had a well-developed written language, a knowledge of the preparation of papyrus. . . ."[16] Inscriptions found on tags and labels of First-Dynasty jars, often regarded because of their crudeness and brevity as primitive attempts at writing, are crude and brief because they were meant to be identification tags and nothing more—not literary compositions; actually, as S. Schott points out, "they are written in a sophisticated cursive writing."[17] For though "hieroglyphics appear all at once in the world as an Egyptian invention cir. 3000 B.C.," hieratic, the cursive writing of the same symbols, was also in use just as early.[18]

All of which is most retrograde to tenaciously held theories of the evolution of writing in Egypt. But how about the rest of the world? Wherever we look the earliest systems of writing are somehow connected with the Egyptian and appear suddenly in the same paradoxical way. Though there is "a prehistoric connection with babylonian cuneiform" and Egyptian, according to Sethe,[19] and though J. Friedrich has demonstrated the connection by an impressive catalogue of striking parallels,[20] the gap between the two systems is still too wide to allow any thought of deriving the one from the other.[21]

"The writing which appeared without antecedents at the beginning of the 1st Dynasty (in Egypt) was by no means primitive," writes Frankfort. "It has, in fact, a complex structure of . . . precisely the same state of complexity which had been reached in Mesopotamia. . . . To deny . . . that Egyptian and Mesopotamian systems of writing are related amounts to maintaining that Egypt invented independently a complex and very consistent system at the very moment of being influenced in its art and architecture by Mesopotamia where a precisely similar system had just been developed. . . ."[22] Not only are these two systems related, but they show remarkable affinities to the earliest Chinese writing,[23] as well as the Hittite, proto-Indian,[24] and proto-Elamitic scripts.[25] P. Mordell insists that the Hebrew Alphabet is related to an Egyptian linear writing system, a real alphabet, that "evolved at a date when hieroglyphic writing was unknown, then persisted with a strange vitality, and was never absorbed or ousted."[26] This was that mysterious prehistoric "Mediterranean" alphabet that is said to be older than hieroglyphic[27] and that suddenly spread all over the Near East at the end of the second millennium B.C.

Evolved? Many scholars have pointed out that the alphabet is the miracle of miracles, the greatest of all inventions, by which even the television and jet planes pale in comparison, and as such, a thing absolutely unique in time and place; they also agree that it was of Egyptian or West-Semitic origin.[29] It is also argued that by the very nature of the thing it can only have been the work of a single inventor.[30] "The gulf between the idea and the written word," writes H. Schmitt, "could only have been bridged once, by a miracle of invention."[31]

Given the evolutionary hypothesis, any healthy normal growing boy can describe in convincing detail how long ago "the naive child of nature" everywhere drew crude pictures to convey his simple thoughts,[32] and how out of this the process moved "everywhere inexorably . . . towards the final stage, the alphabetic writing."[33] To save our eager high-school student from undue embarrassment, we have just quoted two eminent scholars. But if it really happened that way, then we would find traces of evolving writing "everywhere"; veritable middens of scratched rock and bones and shells would attest the universal groping toward the inexor-



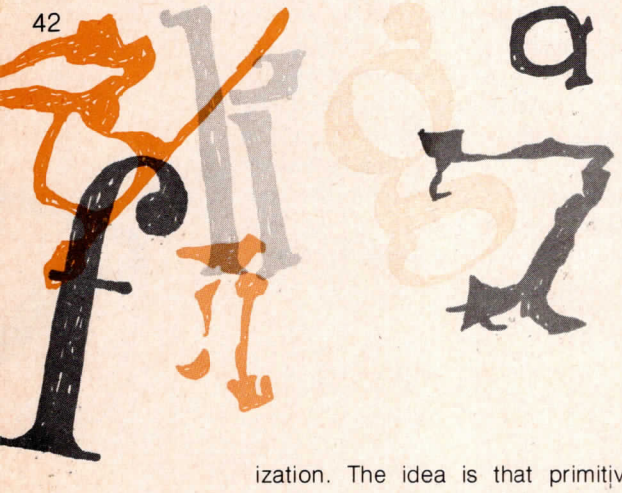
able final stage over tens of thousands of years, while the clumsy transitional forms should outnumber proper writing by at least a million to one. Only the vast accumulations of attempts at writing simply do not exist; there is no evidence whatever of a worldwide groping toward the goal.

Having made his lucid and logical statement, the author of our last quotation observes with perplexity that "it is surprising that the ultimate stage in evolution . . . was only achieved in a very few spots on the globe."[34] That is, we do not find a multiplicity of writing systems throughout the world; in fact, when we come right down to it, there seems to have been only one! We find "only a very few systems of writing," says David, ". . . and even these are so much alike and so closely related in time and space that their independence appears at least problematical."[35] The vast worldwide corpus of embryonic scribblings that should attest the long ages of slow transition from picture-writing to true writing simply is not there, and the innumerable systems of writing that must have resulted from the basic psychological need of men everywhere to express themselves can be counted on the fingers, and most probably on the thumbs, of one hand.

People have always drawn pictures, but was that the origin of writing? Was there ever a real picture-writing? E. Doblehofer defines "pictorial writing," which he says is "incredibly ancient," as "a series of images (which) can possibly be 'read' accurately by any spectator."[36] K. Sethe would agree: a "pure" picture-writing is one that "could be read in any language at sight."[37] And right here the issue is settled: if there ever was a true picture-writing it has not yet been discovered. Where on earth is a single inscription to which any and all beholders, scholars or laymen alike, regardless of their own language and culture, would give the identical interpretation? When Sethe sought for a true picture-writing to illustrate the process by which hieroglyphics emerged, the only examples he could find in all the world were North American Indian petroglyphs, which no one can "read" or interpret to this day.[38]

"True picture-writing," wrote Alan Gardiner, "makes excessive demand upon the skill and ingenuity of the writer, and its results are far from unambiguous. . . ."[39] It takes special skill, that is, to execute "true picture-writing" and special skill to read it: which is to say that it is not the simple and uninhibited drawing and viewing of pictures at all. Professor Doblehofer himself confirms this when he assures us that "the *most primitive* pictorial writings . . . translate . . . abstract ideas with the aid of *symbolical signs,*"[40] for symbolical signs are not plain pictures but conventional devices that must be learned, i.e., even "the most primitive" picture-writing is not just picture-writing as he defines it. In the very earliest Egyptian writing it is impossible to interpret the pictures as such, and there is no evidence of pictograms in Egypt at any time, according to Sethe.[41] Also, we must not forget that along with the most "primitive" Egyptian writing in prehistoric times we find a genuine alphabetic writing flourishing most paradoxically.[42] Long wrestling with the problem of deriving the alphabet from a syllabic writing, i.e., from a system in which the names of things depicted supplied certain sound combinations, has led to the general conclusion that syllabic writing was "a blind alley which could not lead to alphabetic writing."[43]

Like the earliest Egyptian documents, the Babylonian tablets bearing "the *oldest* written signs thus far known" are highly stylized and cannot be read.[44] Granted they are picture-writing, no two scholars "read" them the same. Mesopotamia offers to date the only chance of presenting the evolutionary sequence of the development of writing by a stratigraphic pattern. Only, alas, it doesn't work. Though it is assumed, of course, that "the earliest examples of writing in Mesopotamia are pictographs . . . very few of these were actually excavated



scientifically, so that, from the chronological point of view, there is little help to be obtained from stratigraphic connections," according to Burton-Brown,[45] who should also have pointed out that the inscriptions that have been scientifically excavated have a way of refuting the expected patterns, since some of the most primitive writing is found in late strata and vice versa.

The paradox that anything as advanced and sophisticated as writing should come into the world full-blown and all at once is invincibly repugnant to the evolutionary way of thinking. In recent years the anthropologists have taken a strong stand on the "tool" theory of civilization. The idea is that primitive hominids quite thoughtlessly and accidentally blundered on the use of this or that piece of wood, bone, or rock as a tool, and that "it was the success of the simplest tools that started the whole trend of human evolution and led to the civilizations of today."[46] It is the primitive tool, falling fortuitously into its hands, that draws mankind irresistibly forward to new levels of attainment, for "when men make a tool they commit themselves, man depends upon his tools for his very humanity."[47] In a word, "social evolution is a consequence of technological evolution."[48]

Some of the scientific speculators, however, take the opposite position, that man "has always had reservoirs of response far more than his devices (tools) asked of him," and that in "his attempts to transcend his biological limitations" his mind always runs ahead of his tools, not behind them.[49] When men need a tool they invent it, not the other way around.[50] Men themselves decide what tools they will have, so that one evolutionist notes with perplexity that "one of the most puzzling aspects of the culture" of the "cavemen" is "their heavy dependence on tools whose use is now a complete mystery."[51]

C.H. Coon observed that "for the simple reason that human beings are not equipped by nature to live without tools" we must suppose that they always had all the tools they needed for survival, even in Pliocene.[52] Petrie, in a significant and neglected study, pointed out that instead of eagerly adopting a superior tool as soon as it was made known to them, human beings have shown "a resistance of almost 100 per-cent" to any new tool coming from the outside.[53] Though all the neighbors of the Egyptians knew about their superior axe forms for thousands of years, the only other ancient people to adopt them were, of all things, the South Americans.[54] Petrie knows of seventeen Egyptian tools and weapons, some of unsurpassed efficiency, that are over the centuries never found outside of Egypt, and, he observes, "the converse is equally true."[55]

Then whatever induced one people to adopt *writing* from another? The interesting thing here is that though the idea quickly caught on, each people in adopting it insisted on making it its own exclusive possession and devised from the first a native style that set it off from all the others. Both the popularity and the variety of ancient writing is to be explained by its religious nature. A. von Mulinen has noted that new scripts invariably appear as the vehicles of new religions,[56] while J. Smolian points out that all of man's greatest inventions or discoveries seem to have the primary purpose of putting him into communication with the other world.[57] If Joseph Smith was right, books and writing are a gift to man from heaven, "for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration." (Moses 6:5.) The art of writing was a special dispensation, an inestimable boon, enabling the righteous to retain the memory of divine visitations and communications ever fresh before them, and assisting them in coordinating their earthly activities with the heavenly order: "The *immediate* will of heaven is contained in the Scriptures," said the Prophet Joseph.[58]

The earliest records of the race have much to say "about the miracle of writing, which the Ancients regarded as a gift from heaven."[59] The Egyptians believed that writing was a sacred trust given to the King as "high-priest and scribe" to keep him and his people ever in touch with the mind and will of heaven.[60] Thus the Book of the Foundation of Temples was thought to have been sent down from heaven to the immortal genius Imhotep, the Vizier of King Zoser of Dynasty III and the greatest builder of all time, after which the book "was taken away to heaven at the time the gods left the earth," but was sent down again by Imhotep at a later time, when he "caused it to fall from heaven at the place north of Memphis."[61]

In Babylonia "the King is the Sent One. He has ascended to heaven to receive . . . the tablets of destiny and to get his commission. Then he is sent out, i.e., he descends again. . . . And so the knowledge is communicated to the king, it is of a mysterious character, bearing upon the great mysteries of heaven and earth, the hidden things, and is a revelation of the hidden knowledge by the gods (the god). Can we style it 'primordial revelation' "?[62] The idea of a primordial revelation is that a complete

knowledge of the world from its beginning to its end is already written down and has been vouchsaved to certain chosen spirits from time to time, a doctrine familiar to Latter-day Saints.[63] The heavenly origin of writing is constantly referred to anciently in the doctrine that writing and the symbols of writing are derived from the starry heavens. The Tablets of Destiny, which contain all knowledge and impart all authority, "are the divination of the world, the stars and constellations form the writing."[64] As Clement of Alexandria observed, both in Egypt and Chaldaea "writing and a knowledge of the heavens necessarily go together."[65] How this is can be seen if one considers where all of the oldest writings of the race are found.

If we turn from ancient doctrine to concrete discovery, we are soon made aware that the oldest writings are always found in *temples*. "It is in these temples that we find the first signs of writing. . . . The script appears from the first as a system of conventional signs . . . such as might have been introduced all at once. We are confronted with a true invention, not with an adaption of pictorial art."[66] For Egypt, Steindorff maintained that "the birthplace of this 'hieroglyphic system' of writing was the sacerdotal school of Helipolis."[67] In Babylonia, according to Hrozny, it was in the Uruk period, 3200 B.C. that "there originated . . . from the records of business transaction in the *temple* enclosure, the picture writing which in later times developed into cuneiform writing."[68] Though these symbols cannot be read (i.e., they were not picture-writing, but "a collection of abstract tokens eked out with pictograms"),[69] it is apparent that they "were for the most part lists of commodities supplied to or delivered by officials and others concerned with the administration of the Temple."[70]

Here we have a combination of business and religion that has given rise to the discussion of the rivalry of *Kultschrift* (cultic or religious writing) and *Gebrauchschrift* (practical business writing). Actually there is no rivalry between them: it is agreed by all that the oldest written symbols are property-marks, such as arrow-markings and cattle-brands; and in order to be respected as such they had to be sacrosanct, holy symbols duly registered in the temple.[71] If the oldest writing is used for business, it is always *temple* business, and the writing is also used for other—far more important—purposes, as we have explained elsewhere.[71] Examining the claims of the two, Helmut Arntz concluded that the holy or cultic writing has clear priority.[72] One can, like old Commodore Vanderbilt, carry on business in a state of total illiteracy, and indeed men of affairs have always viewed men of letters with suspicion: "Writing is an art despised by the Roman businessman," wrote Cornelius Nepos, "who have all their writing done for them by hirelings."[73] But one cannot carry on the holy business of the temple without the divine gift of writing.[74] "Hieroglyphic is correctly named," Sethe observes, being devised "only for the walls of temples. . . . It is a survival from prehistoric times."[75] It is no accident that temple architecture and writing appear suddenly together.[76] The *Templum* is, as we have shown elsewhere, an observatory where one takes one's bearings on the universe.[77] There the heavens are carefully observed, and to be of value those observations must be recorded. Alphabet, calendar, and temple naturally go together, all devised for handling messages from the stars and planets.[78] "We may think of the stars as letters inscribed on the heavens," said Plotinus, and we may think of the heavens as a great book that men copy and project on tangible materials at the holy places.[79] Recent studies by Gerald Hawkins, Peter Tompkins, Giorgio di Santillana, and others have given vivid reality to the heretofore vaguely surmised existence of ritual complexes of great antiquity where men observed the heavens and acquired an astonishing amount of knowledge about them, which in order to use, they faithfully committed to their books.

From first to last, ancient writing remains in the hands not of businessmen but of priests; it is a holy and a secret thing imparted only to the elect and zealously withheld from all others. "He who divulges it," we read of a typical holy book, "dies a sudden death and an immediate cutting-off. Thou shalt keep very far away from it. It is to be read only by a scribe in the workshop, whose name has been duly registered in the House of Life."[80] "Only the prophets may read and understand the holy books" is the rule.[81] Each system of writing itself is an effective seal on the holy books, a cryptogram, "a secret formula which the profane do not know."[82] The key to power and priesthood lies "in the midst of the Sea of Coptos, in a box of iron in which is a box of kete-wood, in which is a box of ivory and ebony in which is a box of gold in which is *the* BOOK."[83] The idea of the holy book that is taken away from the earth and restored from time to time, or is handed down secretly from father to son for generations, or hidden up in the earth, preserved by ingenious methods of storage and precious imperishable materials to be brought forth in a later and more righteous generation (e.g., Moses 1:41), is becoming increasingly familiar with the discovery and publication of ever more ancient apocryphal works, Jewish, Christian and others.[84] But nowhere does the idea find clearer or completer expression than in the pages of the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price.

What is perhaps the oldest book known, the so-called Shabako Stone, contains instead of the primi-

tive mumbo-jumbo one might expect a story strangely familiar to Latter-day Saints. It is the text of a ritual drama enacted in the temple to celebrate the founding of the First Dynasty of Egypt, and it depicts the council in heaven, the creation of the world, the fall of man, and the means by which he may achieve resurrection and be reinstated in his primal glory. The book, on a leather scroll, was hidden up in the wall of that same temple in the time of Menes, the first Pharaoh, and was discovered by a later king, Shabako, who followed the same text in the rites establishing his own (the 25th) Dynasty.[85]

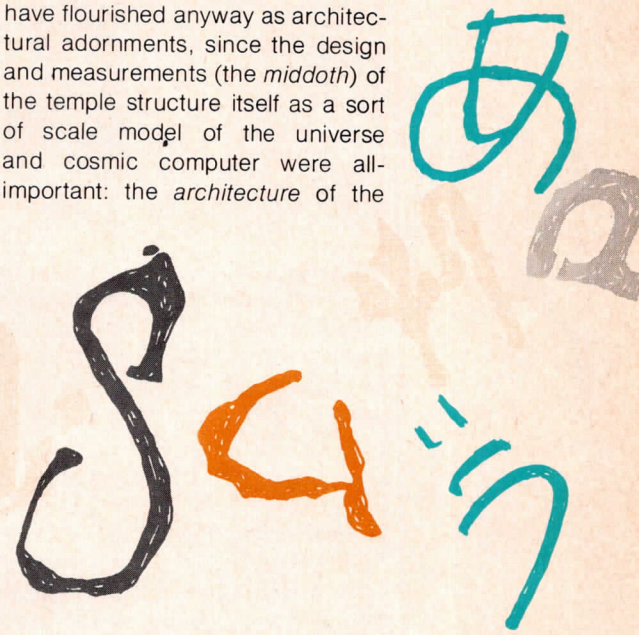
Another King reports that "when His Majesty settled the lands (*grg tawi*). . . he mounted the throne of Horus . . . he spoke to his noble ones, the *Smrw* of his immediate presence, the faithful writers-down of the divine words, who were in charge of all the secrets."[86] Writing, here shared only with his intimates, is par excellence, "the King's Secret" that gives him all advantage over his fellows and the ability to rule them. The technique of writing is the foundation of empire, for only the written document can overcome the limitations of space and carry a ruler's word and authority out of sight and beyond the hills and even defeat the inroads of time on human memory by preserving the words of command and judgment for unlimited numbers of years.[87] The King describes himself as the mediator and scribe of the god in heaven in the administration of empire: "I sit before him, I open his boxes, I break open his edicts, I seal his dispatches, I send out messengers."[88] In Mesopotamia also "the supreme sovranty of the universe is connected with the tablets of destiny, the possession of which could give even a robber possession of the rulership of the world."[89] The Pharaoh was authorized to rule only when "the master of the house of the divine books" had inscribed his royal names "on the true records deposited in the heavenly archives."[90] The archives were known in Egypt as the House of Life, housing the writings upon which the life of all things ultimately depended.[91] It was a powerhouse humming with vital electricity, transmitting cosmic forces from heaven to earth, a place of deadly peril to any mortal not holding the necessary priestly credentials.[92] Wherever the heavenly book is mentioned, the Heavenly Scribe appears as king, priest, and mediator in early Jewish and Christian as well as older traditions.[93] Pharaoh is preeminently "He who knows, being in possession of the divine book."[94] Like the Egyptian Thoth, the Babylonian Nabu, the prophet and scribe, writes all things down in the 'unalterable tablets' of destiny that determine all that happens upon the earth.[95] In the earthly as in the heavenly court everything was written down, not only to follow the divine example but to coordinate earthly with celestial proceedings. In Persia, for example, "the entire administration, as was customary from the earliest times in the Orient, was carried on by written documents, as it was in the courts of Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria . . . everything is carefully written down; even in battle the King's secretary is beside him taking notes; every royal remark is written down and then gathered into 'Daybooks' or 'Memorandabooks,' such as have been found in the archives of Suza, Babylonia, Ecbatana, etc."[96] The Myth of Irra, one of the oldest stories in existence, shows "that Mesopotamian theologians were not ignorant of the concept of a 'sacred book,' that is a divinely inspired, even dictated text, which contains the only correct and valid account of the 'story' of deity."[97] In Egypt it is "the King who is over the spirits, who unites hearts—so says He who is in charge of wisdom, being great, and who bears the god's book, even Sia ['the personification of intelligence and understanding'—Faulkner] who is at the right hand of Re."[98] The relief, mentioned above, from the temple library of Denderah shows us the scribe's palette, at all times the Egyptian symbol of writing and all that it implies, descending from heaven; it is supported by two figures who strike the pose signifying "eternity" and who face each other, denoting "from eternity to eternity," while four other figures are in the attitude of adoration; hieroglyphic symbols above the head of each show them to represent the ear that hears, the eye that sees, the mind or intelligence (*Sia*) that conceives, and the word of power (*Hw*) that consummates the creation of all things.[99]

The books were consulted on every occasion: "Copy thy fathers who have gone before thee. . . . Behold, their words are recorded in writing. Open and read and copy."[100] When King Zoser back in the Third Dynasty asked his all-wise minister Imhotep to explain a seven-year's famine, the latter "begged permission 'that I may enter into the Mansion of Life, and may open the books and may seek guidance from them.' "[101] Interestingly enough, the most important of all writings were *genealogical* records, and Gardiner concluded not only that the House of Life was, properly speaking, nothing more nor less than the genealogical archives, but that the Great Pyramid itself was built to contain the royal genealogical records.[102] The astonishing mass and charge of ancient bookmaking may be attributed to the basic doctrine that everything must be written down: "The Babylonian conception of Canonicity . . . that the sum of revealed knowledge was given once for all by the antediluvian sages," necessarily posits the existence of the Primordial Book that contains everything that was, is, and is to come, and presents "a remarkable parallel to the Rabbinic view that God's revelation in its entirety is contained in

the Torah," according to W.G.K. Lambert.[103]

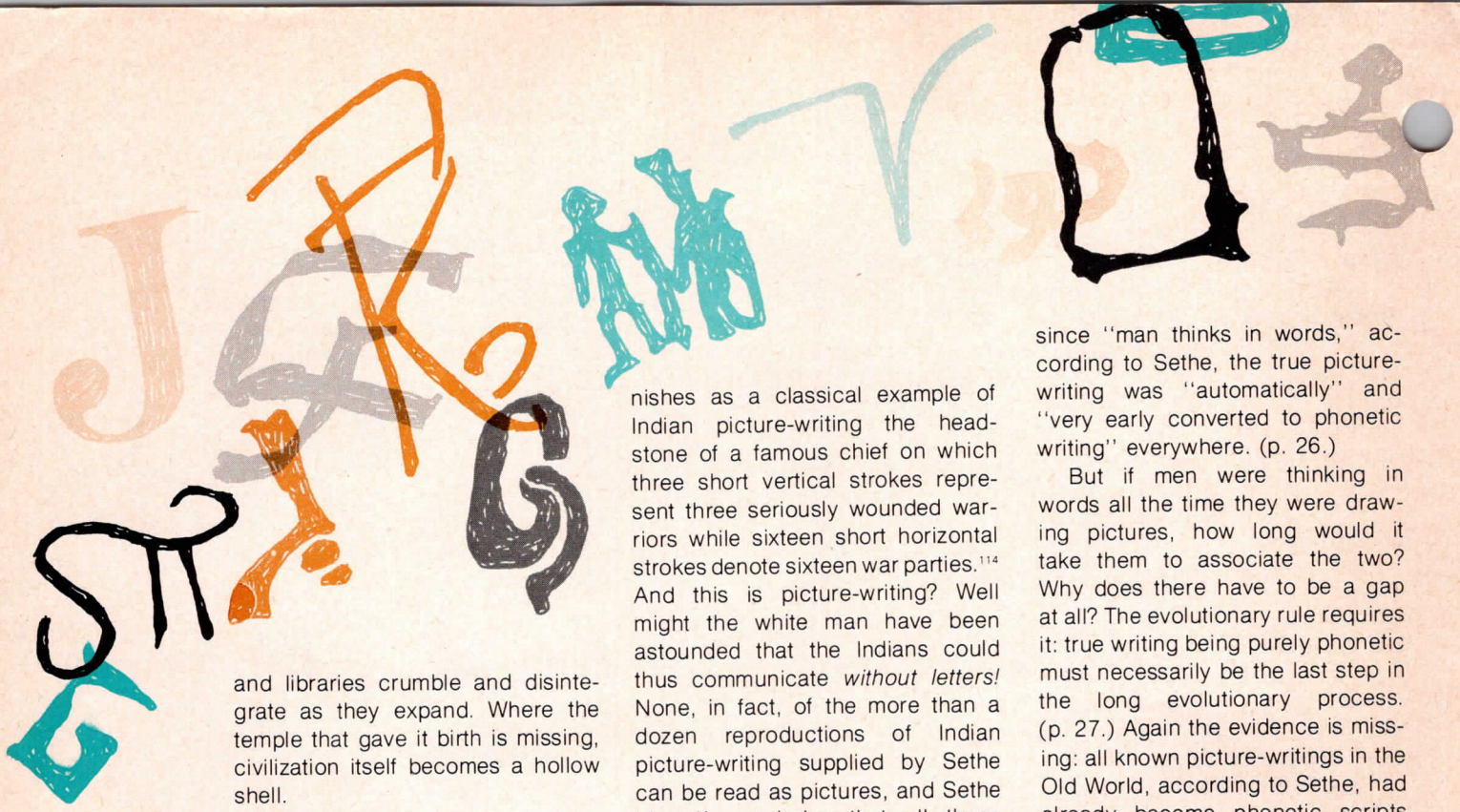
This is consistent with the marvelous function of writing as the great synthesizer. To write is to synthesize. The basic idea of writing is that symbols represent sounds and that smaller units make up larger units—not compounds or composites, but true units. Thus a letter by itself is without significance; there must be a reference to something that goes beyond it—other letters making a word or a name. A single letter, heraldic mark, tally, crest, or *wasm* has no meaning without reference to the official heraldic list of such and the names they represent. The word in turn is also meaningless without reference to other words; even a one-word sentence such as "Alas!" takes its meaning from other unspoken words. The meaning of every sentence also depends on its larger context; even a short aphorism must be understood in its cultural context. For the ancients any self-contained message was a *book.* They were not disturbed by the extreme brevity of many "books," because they regarded every book also as part of a larger context—for the Egyptians the "Hermetic" books. Every proper Arabic book, regardless of its subject, still opens with a paragraph praising God for his creation and the place in it that this particular writing occupies. Ancient records come to us not in single books but in whole libraries. These are not mere collections but organic entities, as the archaic Egyptian sign of the book-lady Seshat attests: her seven-pointed star goes with her seven books, representing every department of human knowledge being let down from the opened heavens.[104]

The House of Life where the books were copied and studied had from the earliest times the aspect of a university, a super graduate school;[105] "there it was that all questions relating to . . . learned matters were settled."[106] The place was always part of the temple, and the books contain the earliest *poetry,* for poema means "creation," and the business of the Muses at the temple was to sing the creation song with the morning stars;[107] naturally the hymn was sung to *music,* and some scholars would derive the first writing from musical notation.[108] It was performed in a sacred circle or *chorus,* so that poetry, music, and the *dance* go out to the world from the temple, called by the Greeks the Museon, or shrine of the Muses. The creation hymn was part of the great dramatic presentation that took place yearly at the temple, dealing with the fall and redemption of man represented by various forms of combat, making the place the scene of the ritual *athletic* contests sanctified throughout the world. The victor in the contest was the father of the race, the priest-king himself, whose triumphant procession, coronation, and marriage took place on the occasion, making this the seat and source of *government* (the king was always crowned in the temple rather than the palace).[109] Since the entire race was expected to be present for the event, a busy exchange of goods from various distant regions took place, the booths of pilgrims serving as the market-booths for great fairs, while the necessity of converting various and bizarre forms of wealth into acceptable offerings for the temple led to an active *banking* and *exchange* in the temple courts—the earliest "money," from the shrine of Juno Moneta at Rome, is temple money. Since the place began as an observatory and all things were tied to the calendar and the stars, *mathematics* flourished and *astronomy* was a Muse. *History* was another Muse, for the rites were meant for the dead as well as the living, and memorials to former great ones (believed to be in attendance) encouraged the production of a marvelous art of *portraiture,* of *sculpture* and *painting,* which would have flourished anyway as architectural adornments, since the design and measurements (the *middoth*) of the temple structure itself as a sort of scale model of the universe and cosmic computer were all-important: the *architecture* of the



hierocentric structure was of primary concern. And since from that central point all the earth was measured and all the lands distributed, *geometry* was essential: "In the Beginning the One God promised Horus that he should inherit the land of Egypt, which was written in the Books by order of the Lord of All . . . at the Division of the Lands it was decreed in writing."[110]

The writings produced and copied in the House of Life were also discussed there, giving rise to *philosophy,* but were concerned largely with cosmology and natural science. In short, there is no aspect of our civilization that does not have its rise in the temple, thanks to the power of the written word. In the all-embracing relationships of the Divine Book everything is relevant. Nothing is really dead or forgotten; every detail belongs in the picture, which would be incomplete without it. Lacking such a synthesizing principle, our present-day knowledge becomes ever more fragmented, and our universities



and libraries crumble and disintegrate as they expand. Where the temple that gave it birth is missing, civilization itself becomes a hollow shell.

A Necessary Addition : In the short compass of a single lecture one always raises more questions than can be answered or discussed. The true origin of writing must remain, as Siegfried Schott observes, a subject of the purest speculation for a long time to come and possibly forever.[111] The fact that all the scholars are merely guessing should not deter us from the fascinating game, for as Karl Popper puts it, it is only by guessing and discussing that any science makes any progress.

Some years ago there was a general consensus among students that Egypt was the ultimate home of the alphabet. The decisive study was that of Kurt Sethe, who tried to follow a strictly evolutionary line, with writing evolving inevitably from everyday human needs throughout the world as if by natural law,[112] "gradually and imperceptibly" culminating in a full-blown alphabet in Egypt.[113] In the beginning, he avers, humans everywhere communicated by pictures, and to prove this he cites cases in which the white man astounded the Indians by communicating in writing *without pictures;* he then furnishes as a classical example of Indian picture-writing the headstone of a famous chief on which three short vertical strokes represent three seriously wounded warriors while sixteen short horizontal strokes denote sixteen war parties.[114] And this is picture-writing? Well might the white man have been astounded that the Indians could thus communicate *without letters!* None, in fact, of the more than a dozen reproductions of Indian picture-writing supplied by Sethe can be read as pictures, and Sethe himself concludes that all these examples are nothing but "mnemotechnical aids" to help the *writer* fix things in his own mind rather than convey them to others; most of the sketches are so reduced and stylized as to be entirely symbolic with no attempt at realism, reduced cues that mean nothing to those who have not already experienced what they depict.[115]

This, however, is not true picture-writing, according to Sethe, that being a foolproof system in which "every single element of the thought process has its own picture." (p. 17.) But if Sethe's examples of primitive picture-writing (of which he could find none in Egypt) were inadequate and even irrelevant, his examples of true picture-writing leave even more to be desired—there are none! All his evidence he must find embedded in later hieroglyphic writing. (pp. 18-19.) In true picture-writing, he says, every concept has its picture so that the writing can be read by anybody anywhere in the world. (pp. 24-25.) As an example he gives the sign of the cross, which accompanying a name signifies a dead person, forgetting that it only does so as a purely abstract and highly conventionalized symbol and not as a picture. (p. 26.) But since "man thinks in words," according to Sethe, the true picture-writing was "automatically" and "very early converted to phonetic writing" everywhere. (p. 26.)

But if men were thinking in words all the time they were drawing pictures, how long would it take them to associate the two? Why does there have to be a gap at all? The evolutionary rule requires it: true writing being purely phonetic must necessarily be the last step in the long evolutionary process. (p. 27.) Again the evidence is missing: all known picture-writings in the Old World, according to Sethe, had already become phonetic scripts *before* their earliest appearance, so that we can only infer the existence of the previous primitive and true picture-writing systems from indications discovered in the known systems. (p. 28.) The only clear evidence that Sethe can find for the evolutionary process is the existence of *independent* systems of writing, all of which, according to him, must have emerged in the same way from primitive picture-writing; he lists ten such systems of which only three had been deciphered in his time. (p. 20.) Since then the list has been extended, and in the process the independence of the various systems from each other has been brought under serious questioning. Since alphabetic writing is the ultimate perfection in the chain of evolution, it is disturbing that Sethe must conclude that the less efficient, clumsier, and more primitive syllabic writing was evolved *from* the more perfect alphabetic writing and not the other way around. (p. 29.)

Sethe's thesis is that the Egyptians, beginning with a true picture-writing containing "originally a countless multitude" of symbols

(p. 34) (which, strangely enough, have never turned up anywhere), through a series of inevitable and "purely mechanical" steps, "quite unconsciously and without intention" produced an alphabet of twenty-four letters, all consonants (p. 38), from which all the alphabets of the world were eventually derived (pp. 45-63). The crucial step was the adoption of these characters to their own language by the Hebrews in Sinai—possibly by Moses himself! (pp. 55.) For Sethe, the "missing link" was supplied by Petrie's discovery of the Siniatic script in 1905. (pp. 57-59.) From first to last "the entire developmental process of writing from pictures to letters can be viewed in the framework of natural science. . . ." (p. 66.)

To Sethe's famous study (based on a series of lectures, 1916-1934), S. Schott added an appendage in 1964. He notes that certain conclusions of Sethe are necessarily premature—the Sinai script has not yet been read with certainty (p. 73) —and cites the later study of H. Bauer, who while agreeing that "the Egyptian origin of alphabetic writing is by no means in doubt" and that "anything as rare and marvelous . . . can hardly have originated twice,"[116] sees the all-important transition to the standard Semitic alphabet taking place not in Sinai but in Canaan to the north (p. 74).

The split between the northern and southern school still maintains, the trouble being that there just isn't enough evidence. (p. 75.) Schott wonders if it is necessary to go through all that rigamarole about the various stages of picture-writing for which no rigorous test is possible. (p. 76.) If we are dealing with a "rare and marvelous" invention, where must we draw the line as to the inventor's inspiration —can he not have invented the whole thing? The trouble with the evolutionary concept in Egyptian writing, Schott observes, is that the process unfortunately runs *backwards!* (p. 80.) The only way to account for the total lack of evidence for all the necessary long transitional phases, according to Schott, is the assumption that everything in those days was written on perishable material, a proposition which he finds untenable. (p. 81.)

And this is where we come in—without apologies, since everything is pretty much up in the air, and there is much to be said that has not been said. Since it is admittedly poverty of evidence that leaves us all in a box canyon, one would think that the scholars, if only in desperation, would venture to consider all of the evidence and not only that which comes under the heading of Natural Science. With all other ways blocked, it might be a good idea to try some of the neglected passages and ask some of the unasked questions. Here are a few:

1. How are we to account for yawning gaps in the evolutionary record, the complete absence of those transitional documents that should, according to the theory, be exceedingly numerous?

2. What about the *sudden* emergence first of hieroglyphic writing and then of the Semitic alphabet, each in its perfectly developed form? Why in the case of admitted human inventions, the work of obvious genius, must we still assume long periods of gradual, accidental, unconscious development if no evidence for such exists outside of the theory itself?

3. The oldest writing appears side by side with the oldest legends about writing. Wouldn't normal curiosity suggest a hearing of those legends? Greek tradition, attributing the origin of the alphabet to Phoenicians, has been thoroughly vindicated; no scholar denies that. Then why not examine other legends seriously, at least until something better turns up?

4. Why is it that the ancients are unanimous in attributing the origins of writing, including the alphabet, to a heavenly source?

5. Why are the earliest written documents always found in temples? Why do they always deal with religious matters?

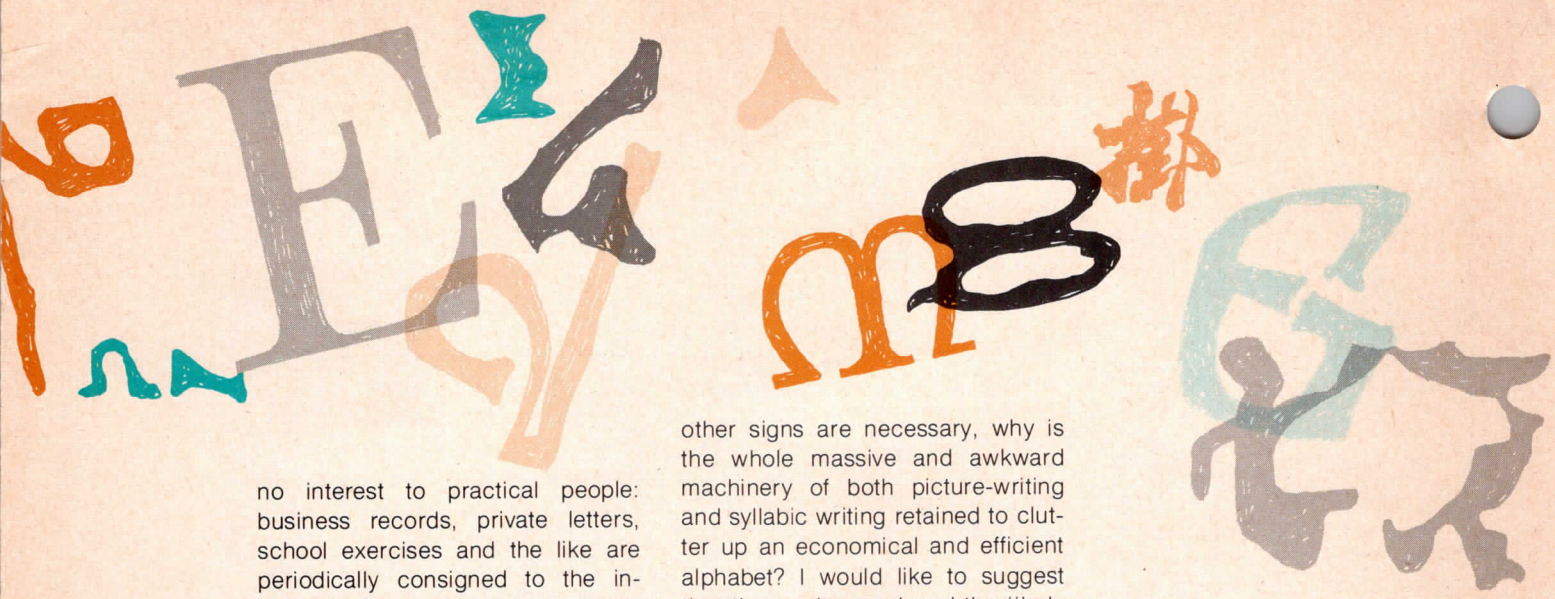
6. Whence the unfailing identification of reading and writing with divination, i.e., with interpreting the will of heaven?

7. "There is in the very nature of writing something marvelous and mysterious, which at all times has exercised a powerful attraction on thoughtful minds," writes Sethe. (p. 1.) Why then does he insist that the first true writing, the product of an unconscious, mindless, "automatic" process "*can* contain only very trivial matters"? (p. 73.) Could anything so *"Wunderbares und Geheimnisvolles"* (p. 1) have been invented in a humdrum way for purely humdrum purposes?

8. The supernatural power of the written symbol is as old as the marking of arrows: how can one comprehend the nature of the earliest writing without considering the miraculous or magical powers it exercised over man and beast?[117]

9. The first writing appears full-blown with the founding of the First Dynasty of Egypt and in a form far too well-knit and consistent to have evolved, according to Schott. (p. 81.) What is the significance of writing as "the King's secret," the indispensable implement to government and authority?

10. Why is writing always a mystery, a guild secret, a kingly and priestly monopoly? "The really marvelous things that writing does, the astounding feats of thought-stimulation, thought-preservation, and thought-transmission . . . are of



no interest to practical people: business records, private letters, school exercises and the like are periodically consigned to the incinerator by clerks and merchants to whom eternal preservation and limitless transmission mean nothing."[118] Why must the latter be given the credit for inventing writing?

Let these ten questions suffice to justify our own speculations. Schott rejects Sethe's main thesis, that the Egyptians had a true alphabet, on the grounds that they mingled their alphabetic signs with syllabic and picture-writing (the ideograms or determinatives that come at the end of words). But whereas the scribes make constant use of the twenty-four letters or single-consonant symbols and could not write without them, they often omit the other signs and seem to be playing with them. Schott maintains that only the Phoenician genius suddenly realized the possibility of doing without the syllabic and pictographic elements entirely; yet for ages the Egyptian scribes freely dispensed with them, now in one word and now in another—they knew it could be done.

Pictures? Hieratic is as old as hieroglyphic, yet it contains no recognizable pictures, and Demotic is anything but picture-writing—why retain pictures in such systems since no one can recognize them? To an Egyptian who spoke the language, the alphabetic signs would be enough, just as the same signs without vowels are quite adequate for the reading of Semitic languages. Granted that some of the other signs are necessary, why is the whole massive and awkward machinery of both picture-writing and syllabic writing retained to clutter up an economical and efficient alphabet? I would like to suggest that those who employed the "holy engravings" (for that is what hieroglyphic means) had not only their own people in mind but were thinking of others as well. One need only think of countless early funeral-steles consciously addressed to distant generations yet unborn. Without ideograms any learned Egyptian scribe could still read a text, but we today could never understand Egyptian without those pictures. Can it be that they are put in there for our benefit or the benefit of others like us? Likewise the eking out of the alphabetic signs with syllabic forms suggests a patient repetition and emphasis for the benefit of stumbling children.

If Egyptian writing because of its compound nature is absolutely unique, perhaps its intention was also unique—to communicate more widely than the other languages. There is a good deal of evidence to support this theory, but we cannot go into it here. For many years learned men guessed at the meaning of hieroglyphics, and when some of them, like Horapollo, Kircher, or Seiffert, made some happy strikes, it was the pictographs that enabled them to do so and that could have put them on the right track had they been properly pursued.

In the 1880s Egyptologists of a number of lands, under the leadership of Professor Samuel Birch of Oxford, collected and interpreted all the then available hypocephali and came up with a surprising unity of views based on the symbolism alone. Today, as many experts are pointing out, it is doubtful whether anyone really understands any Egyptian religious text—there is still a long way to go though much progress has been made. But the point is that the evidence is all there before our eyes and that the Egyptians have perhaps consciously supplied us with an overload of material, a safety-factor to make sure that in the end the message would get across.

As for the Semitic alphabet and our own derived from the Egyptian and often called the greatest of all inventions, the most wonderful thing about it is that it seems to have been devised for the express purpose of recording the scriptures—our scriptures. The objection to Sethe's suggestion that Moses himself may well have been the inventor is today that the alphabet is older than Moses and seems to have been at home at an earlier time up north—in Canaan. Now Sethe does not apologize for citing a Jewish writer, Eupolemos, in support of the claims put in for Moses p. 55), and so it seems only fair to point out that by far the overwhelming authority of Jewish tradition favors not Moses but Abraham as the inventor of the alphabet, though some say he inherited it from Enoch. Of recent years a number of new alphabets have turned up in the Near East, dating to 2000-1500 B.C.,

and all "clearly the inventions of individuals."[119] Well, why not? Once one knows it can be done, one is free to invent one's own alphabet—the Deseret Alphabet is an impressive demonstration of that. But it would seem that "the Canaanitic alphabet, which has conquered the world," is the oldest of all, and as such is "a witness to the ancient origin of the Torah."[120] Some think it may be as old as or even older than hieroglyphic itself.[121]

By the most cautious estimate of the situation, it is safe to say that the scriptures are not to be taken lightly. When scholars who pride themselves on their freedom from any religious commitment are found seriously considering the genesis of the written word not only in holy writings but specifically in our own scriptures, it behooves us to pay attention. Whoever reads the Standard Works today has before him the words of God to men from the beginning, in witness of which the very letters on the page are but slightly conventionalized forms of the original symbols in which the message was conveyed. Merely as a cultural phenomenon the possibility is awe-inspiring, but that it should all go back to Israel and Egypt was too much to hope for. Simply as members of the human race we are bound to approach the scriptures with new feelings of reverence and respect. They are the nearest approach and the best clue so far discovered to the genesis of the written word.

Footnotes

[1]E. Bevan, *Hellenism and Christianity* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1921), p. 81.

[2]So John Lear, in *Saturday Review*, Jan. 10, 1970, p. 99, speaking in particular of population and pollution problems.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 101: "What is happening now is . . . an abandonment of Renaissance-inspired approaches. . . . the new approach is quite different in spirit and method. It begins with a clear acknowledgment of the impossibility of reconstructing the original order of things human."

[4]Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Melchizedek Priesthood Manual, 1972-3), p. 4.

[5]Early Jewish apocrypha emphasize the close association between Adam and the art of writing, a theme which cannot be handled in the scope of this paper. He is called "the four-lettered Adam" in the Sibylline Oracles III:24, referring to the well-known Jewish doctrine that all things were created out of letters in the first place; the theme of the Sefer Yeshirah.

[6]R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford, 1969), nos. 510:1146.

[7]That this Atum is to be identified with Adam has been suggested by leading Egyptologists, e.g., E. Lefebure, in *Biblical Archaeological Society Proceedings*, 9: 174ff, and A. Moret, *Histoire de l'Orient* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1945), I, 209f.

[8]Reproduced by J. Capart, "Exaltation du Livre," in *Chroniques d'Egypte*, 41 (1946), p. 25.

[9]Below, note

[10]W. Englebach, in *Annales du Service*, 42 (1942), p. 197.

[11]J. Capart, in *Egyptian Religion and the East*, 1 (1930), p. 117.

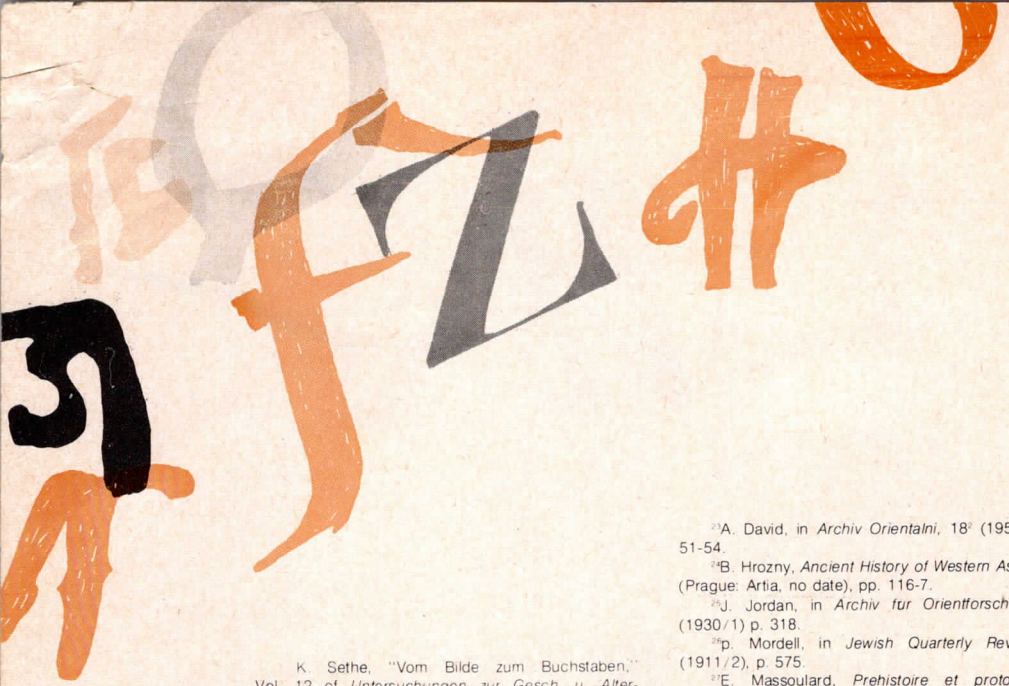
[12]A. H. Gardiner, in *Jnl. of Egyptian Archaeology*, 2 (1916), p. 62.

[13]A. Scharff & A. Moortgat, *Aegypten u. Vorderasien in Altertum* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1950), p. 22.

[14]E. Baumgartel, *Prehistoric Egypt* (Oxford University, 1947), p. 48.

[15]S. Piggott, *The Dawn of Civilization* (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 127.

[16]W. B. Emery, in *The Scientific American*, 197 (1957), p. 112.



K. Sethe, "Vom Bilde zum Buchstaben," Vol. 12 of *Untersuchungen zur Gesch. u. Altertumskunde*, reprint Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1946, pp. 27-28.

[15]A. Scharff & A. Moortgat, *Aegypten u. Vorderasien im Altertum* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1951), p. 46.

[16]Sethe, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[17]J. Froedrich, in *Archiv Orientalni*, 19 (1951), p. 251.

[18]H. Frankfort, *Birth of Civilization* (London, 1957), p. 110.

[19]*Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

[20]A. David, in *Archiv Orientalni*, 18[2] (1950), pp. 51-54.

[21]B. Hrozny, *Ancient History of Western Asia*, etc. (Prague: Artia, no date), pp. 116-7.

[22]J. Jordan, in *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 6 (1930/1) p. 318.

[23]p. Mordell, in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 2 (1911/2), p. 575.

[24]E. Massoulard, *Prehistoire et protohistoire d' Egypte* (Paris; Institut d'Ethnologie, 1950), pp. 323f.

[25]H. Tur-Sinai, in *Jew. Quart. Rev.*, 41 (1950/1), p. 296.

[26]Sethe, op cit., p. 20; H. Bauer, in *Der alte Orient*, Bd. 36, Heft ½ (1937), pp. 12f; Friedrich, *op. cit.*, p. 259; Hrozny, *op. cit.*, pp. 166f looks for the place of origin in Northern Syria, northwestern Mesopotamia, or eastern Asia Minor.

[27]Sethe, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

[28]H. Schmitt, in *Zischr. der dt. Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft*, 97 (1947), pp. 82f.

[29]Sethe, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[30]E. Doblehofer, *Voices in Stone* (N.Y.: Viking Press, 1961), p. 33.

[31]*Ibid.*, p. 22.

[32]A. David, in *Archiv Orientalni*, 18:49.

[33]Doblehofer, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[34]Sethe, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

[35]*Ibid.*, p. 9.

[36]A. Gardiner, in *Jnl. of Near Eastern Studies*, 2 (1943), p. 64.

[37]Doblehofer, *op. cit.*, p. 28. Italics added.

[38]Sethe, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

[39]*Ibid.*, p. 18.

[40]In *Jnl. of Near Eastern Stud.*, 11 (1953), p. 288.

[41]H. J. Lanzen, in *Archaeology*, 17 (1964), p. 125.

[42]T. Burton-Brown, *Studies in Third Millennium History* (London: Luzac, 1946), p. 66.

[43]S. Washburn, in *Scientific American*, Sept. 1960, p. 63.

[44]J. K. Feibleman, in *Social Forces*, 45 (1967), pp. 331f; K. P. Oakley, in *Advancement of Science*, 18 (1948), p. 422; L. Mumford, in *Technology and Culture*, 6 (1965), pp. 375-81.

Note: Since these reflections first appeared in the Commissioner's Lecture Series, an important study on the subject has emerged as the feature article in the June 8, 1973, issue of *Science*. The authors begin by deploring the strange indifference and neglect shown by scientists in the past toward the study of "so-called 'primitive' writing systems," as a result of which the present-day world is almost completely in the dark on the subject. "Under these circumstances," they write, "it is with considerable enthusiasm" that they call attention to an authentic Western Apache writing system that is still in use. The system is ingenious, original, and highly efficient, and is entirely the invention of one man, Silas John Edwards, who produced it in 1904, insisting that the whole thing was given to him in a "dream from God . . . at one time in one dream," for the sole purpose of recording certain ritual prayers and ordinances that have since been faithfully perpetuated among his people. Since the value of the writing was the power to preserve the divine instructions unaltered through time, the knowledge of the system has been "restricted to a small band of elite ritual specialists." (p. 1015.) Of course, Silas John knew about alphabetic writing, yet his system is a "totally unique cultural form . . . among the significant intellectual achievements of an American Indian during the 20th century." (p. 1013.)

The thing to notice here is that Silas John was a plain, simple, but deeply religious Indian, while the system of writing he produced suddenly in 1904 was not only highly sophisticated but has proven perfectly functional. No long ages of evolution were necessary to its emergence; the thing was given, he always maintained, in a single vision, for the express purpose of instructing men in the will of heaven and keeping them faithfully observant of it; it has never been used for anything else. Here in a leading scientific journal is a scientific description of how a system of writing actually came into being among a "primitive" people, and it confirms our own suspicions at every point.

K. H. Basso and Ned Anderson, "A Western Apache Writing System: the Symbols of Silas John," *Science*, vol. 180 (June 8, 1973), no. 4090, pp. 1013-1022.

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