

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE VI.

## HISTORY IN ALPHABETS.

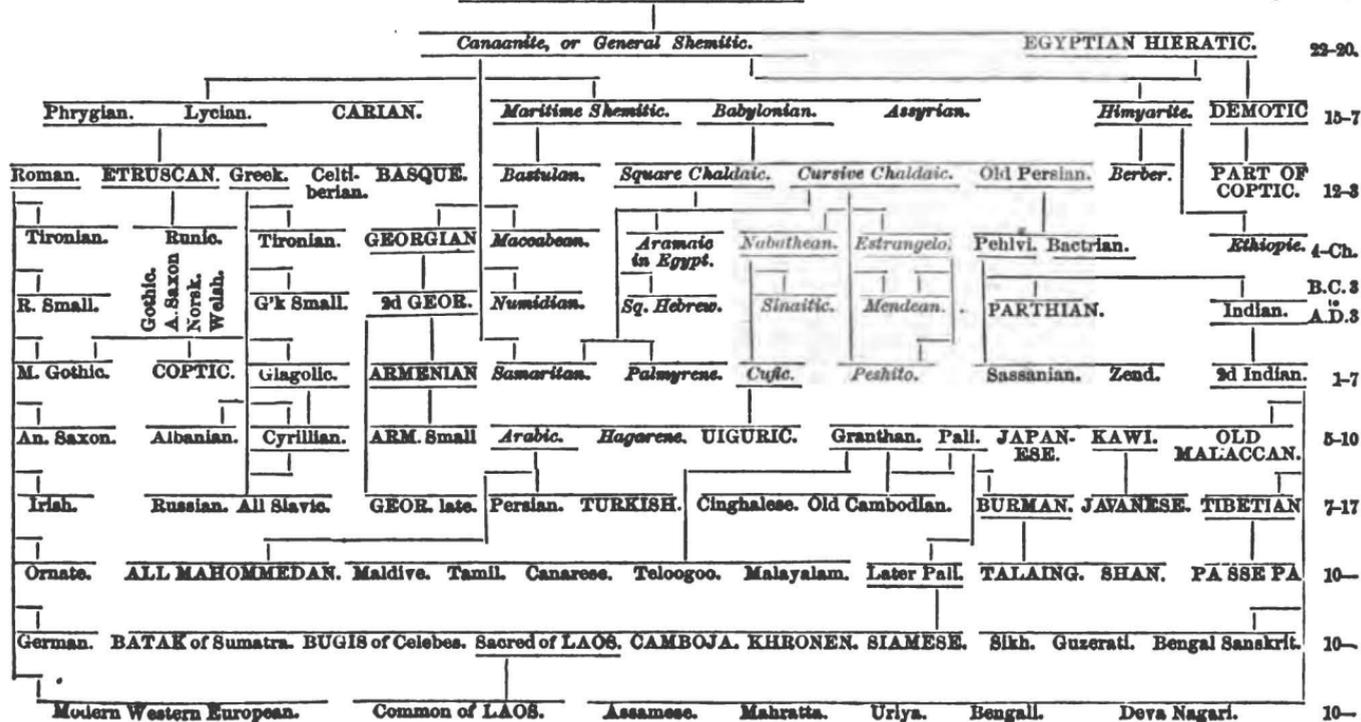
BY REV. JOHN C. C. CLARKE.

THE decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphics, about fifty years since, opened the way for a new science. Since then, discoveries of ancient monuments and relics in many lands have furnished rich materials for the illustration of history. The letters of the handwriting of a large part of the world in all ages lie before us. Coming to us out of a buried past, like the footprints of birds in the rocks, they tell us more than these; for without a Darwin they demonstrate their genealogy, and picture their own history. Laying down the relics in their proper places on the map of the world, our eyes discover a new illustration of the relations of races, the track of commerce, the spread of religions, and the course of civilization. We discover in some nations an unsuspected antiquity of letters, while we abandon some venerable traditions, and recall honors that have been accorded to some peoples.

Before entering into a detailed historical statement, we present a table of the genealogy of the alphabet, so far as ascertained facts can be arranged on a single page. In this table the Hamitic, Turanian, mixed, and uncertain peoples are printed in small capitals. The Indo-European or Japhetic races are in Roman letters. The Shemitic races are in Italics. The figures at the right give an approximation in centuries to the dates of the origin of the various styles of letters. Only two varieties are named which the writer has not carefully examined and tabulated beside their kindred, and none of known importance are omitted, although the table might be enlarged with mere names.

EGYPTIAN PICTURE ALPHABET.

Before Century 25 B. C.



*A Hieroglyphic Alphabet.*—At a very early date, in Egypt, pictures of objects were used to represent the initial sounds of their names. This writing is neither rude nor imperfect, but, to persons familiar with the language, is elegant, precise, and legible, as no alphabet of arbitrary marks could be without long study. If a great variety of signs were used, rapidity of reading might be restricted. There was, therefore, a strong reason for reducing the number of symbols in familiar use. Such a limitation argues a general diffusion of literary culture of a fixed character. In fact, the number of picture letters in common use was at a very early date reduced to the limits of a true alphabet. This alphabet, with a few variations, is now generally recognized, and has been often published. It was adequate to the representation of all the sounds of the Egyptian, Shemitic, and Greek languages. There is no longer room for a doubt of the real inventors of the alphabet. It can scarcely be said to have been invented; for it was almost as natural as speech to a people who preserved primeval antediluvian culture, and used a language composed in large part of monosyllables.

*Hieratic.*—From full pictures the transition was easy to abridged forms and outlines. Thus originated a style which has been named “Hieratic,” as if it belonged only to the priests. In the opinion of some scholars it was used as early as the fourth dynasty. Its use indicates progress, possibly towards priestcraft, but certainly towards schools and literature. This is also shown in the fact that the hieratic writing is always read from right to left; but the hieroglyphs were read in the direction opposed to their facing, which could be either to right or left.

*Demotic.*—About B.C. 625, a new style was adopted in Egypt, consisting, in part, of new abridgments of the hieratic letters, in part of an approximation to Canaanite letters, and in part of elements not yet easily traced. It is called the Demotic or Enchorial style. It belonged to the period of Egyptian decay and innovations, when Psammetichus marched an army to the further borders of Syria, and filled Egypt with mercenaries from Europe and Asia Minor.

A few of the Demotic letters remain in the Coptic alphabet, and a trace of them appears in the Sinaitic; but they mostly passed out of use in the presence of the letters of Greece and Rome. Like the Hieratic, they were always written from right to left.

*Egyptian Source of all Alphabets.*—The genius of the world seems to have been unequal to the production of another alphabet. Indeed, humbling as the confession is, we must admit that human invention has scarcely ever deliberately and suddenly even modified the forms of letters. The endless repetition of the same forms of letters takes its place as a phenomenon alongside the iteration of words. Men have depended for literature and history on the one alphabet, rarely violently modifying it even to meet pressing wants; but usually varying it only as compelled by diversity of writing materials, or gradually following the leadings of convenience and taste.

The only exceptions to the above statements which need be noticed, are in the case of the Babylonian Cuneiform, and the Chinese writings, both of which are syllabic, and not alphabetic; also modern stenography, and barbarisms like the Cherokee syllables and Mormon letters.

*Common Shemitic or Canaanite.*—From Egyptian evidences it is believed that one common alphabet was in use throughout Western Syria as early as the time of the shepherd kings, or before Abraham. No authenticated specimen of this from the first thousand years of its use is known, and it is not probable that its earliest forms are preserved.

The well-known, though recently found, Moabite stone of about 900 B.C., is probably the oldest specimen, but may not preserve the primitive letters so well as more recent relics from other localities. A few inscriptions on stones from Sidon and the Phœnician colonies may be five or six centuries older than the Christian era. A few relics from Assyria are of century VIII. B.C. A few gems and seals may be Hebrew, but of uncertain date. Of specimens dating a little before the Christian era there are now many.

Nearly all the Canaanite letters are derivable from the more common Egyptian hieroglyphs. They are of a hieratic style, but differ from the Egyptian hieratic, being more carefully formed. In the absence of the connecting links we conclude that they were taken from Egypt after the hieratic style was introduced, and that a part of them are close imitations of hieroglyphs, and a part are hieratic. Most of them are from the most common hieroglyphs.

The Canaanites were so far from inventing letters, or even consciously improving them, that they forgot their sources and primitive forms. They even conceived that the letters faced as they were read, towards the left; and they gave them new names suited to that blundering conception. The Shemitic names of the letters only mislead. The facing of some of their letters to the right, e.g. their L, TS, and T, was a puzzle to the Canaanites, but is instantly explained by a glance at the Hieratic Egyptian forms. We dedicate Phœnician honor in the spread of letters to a trifle. The Canaanite alphabet was probably spread over Syria, Arabia, Asia Minor, and North Africa, by caravan commerce, before Sidonian sea traffic began, or Tyre was founded.

*Asia Minor.*—There are reasons for believing that the people of Asia Minor received letters from Northern Syria more than eight, and, perhaps, fifteen centuries, before the Christian era. Carian inscriptions of century VII. B.C., exist in Egypt; and Phrygian and Lycian inscriptions are known which seem to be at least as ancient as B.C. 500, and may have several more centuries of age. The letters are those of Syria, but of a stiffer style. The Egyptian is the style of the pencil, the Canaanite of the pen, the Phrygian of the knife or chisel.

Some inscriptions in Asia Minor face and read to the left. Those that read to the right generally reverse the letters. The alphabet of Phrygia and Lycia contains nearly all the letters of the Greek and Italian alphabets, and is a connecting link between them. The Carian contains a larger number, but the language and race are unknown. The Phrygians

and Lycians were Japhetic races, and in communication with Europe.

*European.*—The alphabet of Asia Minor was probably conveyed throughout Southern Europe many centuries before the Christian era, and everywhere preserved the peculiar type which indicates the line of its descent. Not even in the remote colonies of the Mediterranean could the Phenician style supplant or modify it. The traditions of the introduction of letters by Cadmus and other Phenicians take a place among myths, or the insignificant history of petty colonies.

*Greek.*—It is now seen that the Greeks used all the letters of their alphabet much earlier than has been supposed. Inscriptions of century VII. B.C. exist in Egypt. Relics become numerous after century V. both in Greece and the colonies.

*Italian.*—Bronze plates, stones, vases, gems, and other relics preserve to us the letters of the ancient Italians, although the language of most of them is lost. Their letters are those of Asia Minor, reading sometimes to the right, and sometimes to the left. They incorporate a sufficient number of slight changes to give them a peculiar style. The relics are named according to location, Etruscan, Eugubine, Oscan, Samnite, Roman, etc. Of these the Roman are the most recent, and always read towards the right, and contain a few letters not used by the Etruscans.

*Spanish.*—Early writing in the Spanish peninsula closely resembled the Etruscan. A Shemitic colony on the coast used the Punic letters, known as Bastulan, but the Iberians and Celtiberians used the Japhetic forms, one of the later types of which has been preserved by the Basques.

*Historical Inferences.*—From these facts we are led to infer that in the ten centuries before the Christian era, in which Greece and Rome exhibited their history, there was among the Japhetic races of Europe much movement and intercourse, and also much of literary culture. Knowing now how much of Greek and Roman literature has perished, and how the early Europeans were afflicted by the lack of durable and cheap writing materials, and finding evidences of

great progress in arts at an early date, we are no longer justified in considering all Europeans except in Greece and Italy illiterate. Evidences are accumulating of extensive Etruscan commerce with Northern Europe; and, without these, we know from the letters of the north that cultivating influences had come thither from Italy or Asia Minor.

*Runic.* — At a period not yet ascertained, but early, letters of the Etruscan type passed into general use in central and northern Europe, where their relics are called Runic. There has been much needless mystification respecting these letters, even recent learned books expressing ignorance about them. Their remains are abundant and many are readily deciphered. They are evidence that the Goths were far above barbarism. The principal part of the Runic alphabets consists of Etruscan letters unchanged. The remainder are modifications of Etruscan letters. The simplest style is that of the Norsemen, whose letters are almost entirely Etruscan. These were used by the Scandinavians till their conversion to Christianity in the eleventh century. The Anglo-Saxons used the same letters and a few more, continuing their use to some extent after they became christianized. The Teutonic Goths, and perhaps the Slaves, used the same principal forms and some peculiar variations. The Welsh, by various changes, increased their alphabet to forty-five runes. An inscription in Helsingland, Sweden, is written in dots, dashes, and short lines, which seem to be abridgments of common runes, and have been so deciphered.

*Stenography.* — The ancient Latins and Greeks did not satisfy themselves with the use of capital, or uncial, letters. The necessities of a vigorous age pressed then, as now. Systems of abbreviated writing, called "Tironian," after a freedman of Cicero, were in use before the Christian era. Specimens on tablets and papyri are preserved which are ascribed to centuries I. and II.

*Small letters.* — A multitude of inscriptions on the walls of Pompeii attest the use of small, or minuscule, letters in the first Christian century. It is still noticeable that many small

letters bear closest resemblance to the antique forms of the capitals. It is highly probable that minuscule letters were in use for common purposes before the Christian era, although capitals continued to be used in choice manuscripts.

*European from Roman.* — From the later Latin all the mediæval and modern styles of Western and Central Europe arose. Christianity was the agent of extension and of adornment. While the essential forms were preserved, new and more tasteful styles became frequent. One, which took shape in the fifth century, was adopted by the Anglo-Saxons; another, considerably later, was taken by the Irish, by whom it is still used. Other styles, like Old English, Black letter, German text, and Church texts, are too well known to need more than mention. But, while these were introduced, the old forms continued to be common, and so the Greek and Latin capitals have the honor of being the most ancient letters now used.

*European from Greek.* — Greek influence in Europe was, of course, less in extent and power than Roman. Yet proximity, and the possession of the original text of the New Testament, made Greece the agent for giving letters to the Meso-Goths and Slaves.

*Meso-Gothic.* — A copy of the Gothic Bible of century iv., and relics of a more recent date, give us the Gothic letters, which are mostly Greek, both large and small, with traces of the Runic and Latin influences.

*Slavic.* — Tradition ascribes the invention of the old letters of the Slaves to Jerome, in century v. The forms that are preserved are among the most curious styles of the world. An analysis of their essential elements induces the conviction that they contain the remains of a more ancient alphabet, either Phrygian or Greek, to which some additions have been made from old Canaanite. But the forms have been rudely modified. In the ninth century they were modelled by Methodius and Cyrilus into more resemblance to the Greek, and this likeness has since been increased, so that modern letters of Russia and the Slavic provinces much resemble the Greek and Roman.

*Coptic Egyptian.* — After Greek culture became potent in the world's progress, it entered the birthland of the alphabet; and, among the descendants of its originators, buried in oblivion almost all the old Egyptian letters, and planted the alphabet of the more vigorous northern civilization. This was another phase of the great phenomenon of history. The primeval civilization, best preserved in the wealth of the children of Ham, blossomed among them into beauty, but never improved, and slowly withered. The poorer and slower children of Shem caught some fragments of the dying stock, and conserved without cultivating them. The sons of Japhet, after lingering long on the higher land and poorer soil, cultivated, reaped, and enjoyed the harvest.

*Georgian.* — We turn back our eyes to Asia, but only to that border land of the Caucasus which has always been the meeting-ground of Japhetic, Shemitic, and Scythian races. Ancient cuneiform inscriptions attest a former sway of Assyrian monarchs; but history and native monuments fail, and a shadow covers the antiquity of the high-caste people. We look to their alphabets, and rays appear in the darkness. Tradition ascribes to Pharnabazes, about B.C. 300, the invention of an alphabet for the Georgians. The invention must be denied. The tradition may give the date of the introduction of new elements of civilization. The old capital letters of Georgia are the old common letters of Canaan, only changed by a few tasteful modifications and additions. Later ages made little change in these, except as to style. Impressions from Chaldea, Persia, and Syria are evident; but Greek influence only prevailed to turn the reading from right to left, without reversing the letters. Later times have developed out of the old capitals a set of minuscules very different in appearance, which was only completed in the seventeenth century.

*Armenian.* — Tradition honors Mesrob, A.D. 406, as the inventor of Armenian letters. The letters themselves deny the invention, and show that the basis of the Armenian alphabet is the Georgian, to which Syrian and Greek additions

have been made. There are two sets of capitals, from which have been developed two sets of minuscules of scarcely recognizable parentage.

The conflict of Oriental and Greek civilization appears in the Georgian letters ; but this heathen culture was nearly fruitless. Christianity gave to Armenia a literature and a civilization which is now a power in Eastern Europe and Western Asia.

We turn our eyes now to the South, and to a land where deeper shadows rest. The south of Arabia has ever been, by reason of climate and man's barbarism, nearly impenetrable to Europeans. Recent discoveries have given glimpses of an unsuspected antiquity of civilization there.

*Himyarite.* — Inscriptions of the Himyarite Arabs are found, elegantly carved on fine stones, and associated with ruins of splendid works and cities. No alphabet of the world is so puzzling. Six of its letters are identical with ancient Canaanite. A few more may plausibly be derived from the same source. Others can readily be explained as derived from Egyptian Hieratic, or Canaanite. Eminent scholars have claimed for this writing an antiquity of ten or fifteen centuries before Christ. But, although thirty-five plates are given in a single number of the publications of the German Oriental Society, and the most eminent Shemitic scholars have given much study to the inscriptions, the steps of the development of the alphabet and the age of many of the relics are still uncertain. It may, however, be confidently said that the basis of the alphabet is the same as that of the Canaanite, and that a part is taken therefrom. All the peculiarities may be explained on the supposition of an isolated development of the Himyarite letters under Egyptian, rather than Canaanite, influence. The alphabet contains the twenty-two Canaanite letters, and also the six peculiar aspirates for which the northern Arabs used no special signs till several centuries after Christ. The Himyarite alphabet continued in use till after the time of Mohammed, and its relics are scattered over Arabia, and as far north as Central Syria ; but most of them are little older than the Christian era.

*Ethiopic.* — The Himyarite alphabet is deciphered by a perpetuated key, for it became the medium of the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia and Abyssinia, and is still used there. Greek or Roman influence prevailed to turn the reading of the Ethiopic towards the right hand. Some untrained and apparently indigenious scholasticism introduced modifications, by which each letter may be made seven different syllables for the vowels and four for the diphthongs. For Abyssinian use the number of letters, by slight changes, has been increased to thirty-three typical forms and about two hundred and fifty syllables. It is a curious structure now, but covered with the signs of a venerable and interesting history.

*Libyan.* — As we turned westward along the northern border of the Mediterranean, so we turn on the southern. A Shemitic, but not Arabic, people occupy much of North Africa. They were of old the supports of Carthage and Numidia and Mauritania. They are known as Berber, Tuarick, Tiffnag, etc. Monuments, with inscriptions in a strange alphabet, accompanied sometimes by a duplicate in Punic, are found, attesting an ancient civilization. It was supposed that the key to the old alphabet had perished; but it has been discovered that, through all the changes of more than two thousand years, — through heathenism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism, — this old literary culture has had a tenacity of life, and has been cherished as a secret. The writer has gathered five Berber alphabets, all of which have a foundation in the ancient form; but some of them have been modified by influences which seem to have been barbarian, Chaldaic, Numidian, Punic, Syriac, and Arabic. The basis of the alphabet bears much resemblance to the Himyarite, and that was probably its parent.

Here, then, is an illustration of the vitality of a certain literary attainment, accompanying paucity of invention, without literature or Christianity, or even Hebraism, for its parent and early protector. Coming out of a remote past, this Runic of Africa outlives the Runic of Europe by nearly a

thousand years; while the parent Himyarite or Ethiopic almost contests with the letters of Europe for the honors of the most venerable longevity. Had there been fewer changes in the Ethiopic, Europe must have yielded the palm.

*Assyrian.*—Turning from Syria eastward, the eye rests on the cradle-land of races, whose mysteries have only lately begun to be uncovered. In Babylonia appear relics of a civilization for which some students claim an antiquity as remote as that of Egypt. Historical tablets, perhaps as old as Abraham, present to us a writing clumsy and difficult, but not inelegant. Its characters are combinations of marks like nails or wedges. They are not letters, but syllables. The origin of this writing remains a secret. If it had any connection with the letters of Egypt or Syria, the relation is not discovered. A similar, yet distinct set of characters served the Assyrians, even till the time of the extinction of the empire.

But in relics of Assyria, dating a little more than seven hundred years before Christ, appears a writing of a different character. It is found on some bronze weights, and on tablets of clay, and on vessels. It is the alphabet of Canaan, assuming a new and ruder style, but every letter distinctly recognizable. It tells a story of an Assyrian conquest of Canaan, and of the transfer of the children of Israel beyond the Euphrates.

*Babylonian.*—The Canaanite letters also appear in relics of Babylonia, but not till century VI. B.C., after the removal of the Jews to Babylon. Like the Assyrian specimens, they show much change from the older forms. The letters open their circles, change their lines, and drop fragments. The variations all tend to the production of a distinct type. Peculiarities which were at first rude blunders become fixed elements of letters of a new style. Relics are sufficiently numerous to give us almost every step of the transformation of the old letters of Canaan to those of Chaldea and Syria.

*Chaldaic, Square and Cursive.*—The letters in Mesopotamia passed first into a form which may be called Square

Chaldaic, if the name be taken to describe geographical, rather than ethnical, origin. But at the same time, and before this was finished, it passed rapidly, in other hands, into a more cursive form, adapted to more rapid writing. The relics indicate the same strange mingling of conservatism and fickleness, intercourse and isolation, that all Shemitic history displays. The land of Shinar, which had witnessed the confusion of speech, witnessed also the confusion of its written representative. Not only are remains found, nearly side by side, bearing letters of the Egyptians, Himyarim, Babylonians, and Assyrians, but the relics of the newly immigrant alphabet show that some peoples seated near each other grasped the letters in different stages of their changes, and then held them with a firmness that never allowed them to vary, while other peoples near by made changes freely.

*Square Aramaic.* — Varieties of the square Chaldaic are found on a stone and papyri of Egypt, which are ascribed to Jews of centuries III. and I. B.C. The style does not seem to have attained its extreme type until about the Christian era. Who were its principal promoters cannot yet be told.

*Square Hebrew.* — The Jews appear to have been nearly its exclusive users, and it entirely supplanted their older writing in their hands. It appears safe to say that the Hebrews, in respect to their alphabet, are among the least conservative of men, and were the authors of its transformation. The letters now known as Hebrew are the extreme form of square Aramaic, belonging to a time after Christ, and embodying some peculiarities from the finished cursive Chaldaic.

Many medals are passing about in our country, and found in museums, which bear the words, "Shekel of Israel. Jerusalem the holy." The writer has seen them on exhibition, labelled, "Coins of Moses and Solomon." The voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau have been at the old tricks again; for the letters are the newest of the new Hebrew, and the medals are of course worthless, except when of silver, but many of them are only copper.

*Palmyrene.* — A few inscriptions of Palmyra, dating from

A.D. 84 to 251, exhibit several varieties of Aramaic letters. Some of them are a peculiar style of the square letters, which have an unusual tendency to become joined, while others are of cursive forms, without the usual tendency to junction. They indicate a meeting, in that city, of eastern, western, northern, and southern Shemitism, and yet an essentially Syriac and isolated civilization, exerting little influence on the world.

*Cursive Aramaic.* — The cursive Chaldaic rapidly ran several courses of development, and probably attained nearly the finish of several styles two or three centuries before the Christian era.

*Double forms or final letters.* — A peculiarity of all these styles is the juncture of letters by flowing lines. At first, the lines were merely extensions of parts of the letters; but afterwards, lines were needlessly used as parts of the style, and new lines and flourishes were adopted as parts of letters. In the transition stages, some letters assumed several forms, which at first were used indifferently, but finally all the Shemitic races adopted distinct forms for initial, medial, and final letters. In the modern Hebrew letters the connecting or base line appears in Beth, Gimel, Kaph, Nun, Samech, Pe, and Tsadde. The double forms of five letters are easily explained as above.

*Syriac.* — One style of the cursive Aramaic seems to have been adopted by most of the Syrian people from the Tigris to the Mediterranean. This fact adds a new illustration of the disintegration and reconstruction which had been produced by the successive waves of war sweeping over the East. But the absence of remains of heathen literature indicates, also, the potency of a new agency in the new unity and fresh literary culture.

*Estranghelo.* — The cursive Aramaic used in the first and second Christian centuries, called Estranghelo, had become both elegant and convenient. The translation of the scriptures into Syriac, and their wide use, fixed this alphabet in the veneration and affections of nearly all Syrians, and secured its perpetuation. But not even thus was unity secured.

*Nestorian.* — The Nestorian Christians have preserved their scriptures in nearly the Estranghelo characters, and they are also well preserved in the style used for title-pages of books.

*Peshito.* — But the great body of Syriac literature is preserved in the Peshito character, which is a simplification of the Estranghelo, and more flowing. In this character the holy scriptures were carried to China, Tartary, and Malabar, and in this latter place are still cherished by thousands of Christians.

*Mendean.* — But there have been other conserving powers beside Christianity. The Sabaeans of Babylonia use a peculiar form of Syriac letters which have come down to them from an early date. They are the letters called Mendaeen, and, sometimes wrongly, Syro-Galilean, and were used by a people called by some Mendes of Egypt, A.D. 277, and by others, Charannians, Zabians, and Mandai Jahia, Disciples of John the Baptist, and pretended Christians.

*Nabathean.* — We have not yet exhausted the list of names, nor the wonders of the children of Shem. We approach last the most wonderful and most numerous race. The vast region of Arabia invites a new survey. The cursive Chaldaic writing passed into the hands of the men of the desert, and in all northern Arabia usurped the place of the Himyarite letters. It assumed a new and ruder form, at least in the inscriptions carved on rocks, which are its principal remains. But numerous inscriptions widely spread argue that a great people were familiar with the letters. And inscriptions so rude as to be scarcely legible argue that there were people who were more carefully preserving the forms of the letters. Inscriptions in a peculiar character have long been known to exist in great numbers in Bashan, Idumea, and all northern Arabia. Great numbers of them are on the rocks of the mountains near Sinai, and have caused much speculation as to their authorship. They are also found on the Egyptian shores of the northern part of the Red Sea, and in other parts of North Africa. There was a Nabathean Arab kingdom in Idumea before the Christian era, and these letters appear

on its coins and inscriptions, and hence the name "Nabathean" is given to them. But there are many reasons for believing that in all the northern half of Arabia this alphabet was generally used a little before the Christian era. The explorations in progress in Syria may be expected to make known vast numbers of these inscriptions. The alphabet ought never to have been difficult to any one familiar with the Cufic; yet it was only deciphered by Professor Beer in 1843.

*Sinaitic.* — The inscriptions near Sinai are now recognized as memorials only of Arab visitors a little before and a little after the Christian era. The letters are simply cursive Chaldaic of a peculiar style, with perhaps slight modifications from Demotic Egyptian. But their distinct type is an illustration of the human proclivity for national characteristics; and the great number and wide dissemination of relics are evidences of much literary culture among the Arabs.

*Cufic.* — The Nabathean letters continued in use among the Arabs till the era of Mohammed, in the seventh century, when the forms were made more elegant, though unchanged in essential outlines. The lines were made broad, and conventional forms for initial, medial, final, and unconnected letters became fixed. The name "Cufic" designates this alphabet of early Mohammedanism. In it the Koran was carried wherever the Moslem sword opened the way in Asia and Africa.

*Arabic.* — The modern Arabic letters called "Hat" and "Neshki" are the Cufic adapted to rapid writing. They came into use about century x., and, as the alphabet of Mohammedanism, have been adopted by Africans, Persians, Turks, Tartars, Hindustani, and others. In these letters there is a vast and varied literature. Varieties of the old Arabic letters appear in different quarters, all indicating that the alphabet spreads like a vine, and is dependent on the life of a common stock, and yet that national traits will give their impress to the new growth. The old Turkish or Uiguric is one of these varieties, indicating that Mohammedanism early

held the Turks under its sway. An odd alphabet, used by some Saracens, and called "Hagarene," is made from Cufic and modern Arabic, but strings all the letters on one base line, like some Sinaitic inscriptions.

*Samaritan.*—In treating of the early Canaanite letters we were silent respecting the Samaritan letters. There was reason for the silence. And yet there are advocates of the claims of the Samaritans to the possession of the oldest manuscripts in existence, and to the preservation of the oldest letters.

We could wish to find in the Samaritan relics the utmost possible antiquity, but they must be subjected to a rigid criticism. For the mss. there are various tests, among which is an analysis of the letters. It can be no longer said that the Samaritan alphabet preserves the ancient form of the letters. There are several Samaritan styles, of which, of course, only one can be primitive. The manuscript which is supposed to be the oldest, purports to have been written by Abisha, great-grandson of Aaron. Whether it is even a copy of such a document is a question for another line of criticism. The letters of this manuscript differ from old Moabite, Phœnician, and Maccabean, about as much as Greek differs from the same, or Anglo-Saxon differs from Etruscan. They not only have an elegance unknown in any other ancient written letters, but they have assumed peculiar forms; and these peculiarities seem to be those of the later square Hebrew, and to indicate a Hebrew or Chaldaic origin. We have, therefore, little reason to heed the Samaritan pretensions.

*In the heart of Asia.*—We turn our eyes now to the remoter regions of Asia. A labyrinth of diverse races, languages, religions, and letters is before us, and over all rest shadows of distorted histories. Can we expect to find unity in this variety, and especially that unity which we have seen elsewhere?

*Old Persian.*—First we enter Persia. We meet a literature of a religion claiming to be older than Christianity, and preserved in letters in which the books have been written

from remotest antiquity. Laying these books aside for the present, we notice that when the Medes swept away the Assyrian empire, B.C. 625, they erected no monuments which gave evidence that they possessed a literature or letters. Possibly they bore away with them to the Bactrian highlands the letters of Canaan which Assyria had captured, but of this there is no evidence, except, perhaps, the fact that the later Bactrian letters were more corrupted than the Persian. When the Persians, B.C. 538, extended their sway over Babylon, they seem to have been entirely illiterate. They then adopted two alphabets. One was a new alphabet in cuneiform letters, to be used for stately inscriptions alongside the old letters of Assyria and Babylon. The other was the alphabet of the captive Jews in the then incipient Aramaic form. These letters appear on Persian seals, medals, gems, and other relics, and seem to have become the common alphabet of Persia.

Shinar beheld at last the counter-revolution; and, near the ruins of Nimrod's tower and the fresh grave of Cushite civilization and idolatry, the tardy children of Japhet seized the lawful chieftainship of their ancestor, and from the withered and manacled hands of the children of Shem plucked the most precious treasure which they had preserved from the arts of the western branch of the family of Ham. The Persian conqueror was appreciative and generous. The people whom he found worshipping, like himself, a spiritual conception of Divine Unity, he restored to freedom, and in exchange received a simple gift, but one that gave to his religion immortality, and to his sacred legends a depository more secure than the new temple that rose at Jerusalem.

As Chaldean letters advanced towards the cursive style, the Persian letters became somewhat similarly modified, but assumed a peculiar national type. Widely pervasive influences, now imperfectly revealed, were, in the same age, causing all the children of Japhet from the west of Europe to the south of Asia to rise up with the inspiration of a new civilization; and all were quickened by the same

alphabet, which they made the servant of distinct types of civilization.

The Greek conquest of the east, followed in the fourth century, and for a while, to some extent, mingled Greek letters with Persian in Persia and Bactria. Yet they could not displace the Aramaic Persian letters, nor even cause a change of their fashion of reading towards the left. This tenacity of life in the new alphabet is strong confirmation of our opinion that these were the first letters of Persia. The Pehlvi, Parthian, and Sassanian empires succeeded the Persian, but the same letters continued, though gradually changing. A thousand years passed and brought the Moslem conquest and its new influences. Some lovers of the Zoroastrian religion, preserved, as some do still, its traditions and books. Naturally then, but only then, the veneration and affection which clung to the old books began to cherish their letters, and they began to be revered as a sacred alphabet. The Pehlvi of the seventh Christian century became the Parsee medium of current literature, and the very similar alphabet now called "Zend" shared the embalming of the sacred books, the Avesta and Zend. Criticism of the age of the text of the Avesta belongs to another line of inquiry, but the age of the manuscripts cannot be great, as we reckon age in such matters.

*Indian.* — We pass further eastward into India and meet letters which are called the writing of the gods, and a literature which claims the honor of unrivalled antiquity. But if we search for monuments, the oldest relics appear to be inscriptions not older than cent. III. B.C., if so old. Such inscriptions are found in several parts of Northern Hindustan. Some of them are memorials of then incipient Buddhism. The alphabet is peculiar. Unlike the Persian, it is read towards the right. The letters have the general square and solid appearance of the Greek, and yet not a letter is Greek. Most of the letters are like Pehlvi, or rather they are so like the latest Sassanian, that, except in deference to Sanskrit scholars, we hesitate to say they are as old as the Christian era.

From data now attained there is reason to believe that an illiterate India received an alphabet first about three hundred years before Christ, from Persia, but by new influences political and religious. The clue to the mystery is at hand. The Greek conquest then reached the Punjab, when Buddhism was rising into power, and, as is well known, gave to it a great impetus. But the Greek influence on the Indian alphabet was only general. The letters were essentially Pehlvi.

This alphabet spread throughout Northern India, and by its help Buddhism was carried far among most diverse nations. The alphabet in Northern India remained essentially unchanged for centuries. Inscriptions on monuments and copper plates of the fourth century show little variation.

*Most Asiatic from Old Indian.*—In the old form it went with Buddhism to further India and to Ceylon, and, associated with the Pali language of the sacred books, preserved, under the name of “Pali,” alphabets which are essentially the Magadha, or Old Indian. Such is the sacred alphabet of Siam in a square heavy form, and of Burmah in a light round form. They indicate that the passage of Buddhism to these countries was early after the Christian era. The sacred alphabet of Java, called Kawi, is a variety of the same old Indian. Inscriptions in Malacca ascribed to centuries ix. and x. show the same alphabet rudely written. From the old Kawi the modern Javanese is made, principally by changing the old heavy penstrokes into hollow outlines of great delicacy. From the Pali of Burmah, has come the Burman, and from this the modern letters of neighboring races like the Talaing, or Mon of Pegu, the Shan, and Karen.

*Later Southern Indian.*—The first Indian alphabet, now called Magadha, did not remain unchanged. Throughout the southern half of the peninsula of Hindustan a very different style of writing prevails. It may be called a sprawling or straggling style. Quite different alphabets are used by the Teloooons, Canarese, Cinghalese, Tamils, and Mahrattas, but these all come together, and find their source in the

Grantha, which preserves the essential forms of the oldest Indian. Of this the Malayalam of Central India is nearly a copy, and the cursive forms of Pali are very similar.

*Further India.* — These Pali letters penetrated Farther India, flowed beyond Burmah to Anam, and gave rise to all the alphabets of Laos, Xieng Khrun, and Cambodia, and to the Siamese, and to those of the islands of Celebes, Makassar, Sumatra, and others.

*Later Northern Indian.* — In Northern India the Magadha letters received a different modification by addition of lines, by which they were enclosed or erected. Considerable differences have arisen between the letters in different states of Northern India, yet all are closely related, and all are from the Magadha without great change of essential forms. Because these northern tribes are most Sanskritic, credence has been given to the claim that the Deva Nagari alphabet is the oldest in India. In truth it is the alphabet which has received more modification than any other northern type, and must rank among the very newest of its style. The letters which in Bengal are used for writing Sanskrit are of an older style than the Deva Nagari, which in this country are supposed to be the distinctive Sanskrit alphabet.

*Thibetian.* — In the seventh and eighth centuries Buddhism, which was soon after destroyed in India, crossed the Himalayas, and was embraced in Thibet and Mongolia. It gave to Thibet the Indian letters of the seventh century, and to these Thibet owes its literature. Another Mongolian alphabet, called "Pa Sse Pa," is only the Sanskritic Thibetian made square and heavy, although tradition says it was invented in 1260 A.D.

*Japanese.* — But the spread of letters and of Buddhism did not cease till Japan, in the eighth century, adopted letters whose foundation was the Indian alphabet.

*Summary.* — We close our survey at the shores of the Pacific Ocean. We have seen that the alphabet was the blossoming of the primeval civilization of Egypt. Incapable of transportation, it seemed to wither, but the withering was

the necessary ripening of the seed, to fit it for a life anywhere throughout the world. Carried to Canaan it grew and blossomed anew, and from its perennial flowers gave out to every wind its floating seeds, which, borne to east and west, and north and south, have reached the utmost coasts, and, encircling the globe, have filled it with their fruit.

Human pride must humble itself before this evidence of man's imbecile dependence. Civilization and literature blush at their own youthfulness. The mazes of history grow more wonderful as they are seen to mingle with the mysteries of divine providence. Events which seemed to be local trifles have proved to be tidal waves, which, on three continents, left the tokens of the passing of a great era. The sun can scarcely compass, with his noon-day rays, the scope of the glory of that sixth century before Christ. Syrian captives wept by the rivers of Babylon, but Eastern Asia smiled as glad eyes found in the plucked flower of Canaan transplanted on the Euphrates, something more precious than would have been music from the silent harps on the willows. A new life is felt in the land of Shinar, and sends its impulses to the west. It seems to fall in the assault of war on Greece, but utmost Europe and the islands of the sea are by it covered with the glory of a new civilization.

And we, surrounded with our treasures and our joys, must say, with letters we have everything. Without the one alphabet there had been nothing.