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## THE HISTORY OF THE ALPHABET.

By the Rev. ISAAC TAYLOR, M.A.

(*Précis by the Author.*)

THE history of the alphabet has been only known within the last few years. De Rougé's great discovery of the derivation of the Semitic letters from the Egyptian hieroglyphics has proved that the alphabet is the oldest existing monument of human civilization,—older than the Pyramids.

There were three stages in its invention :—

1. Ideograms,—pictures of things.
2. Phonograms,—symbols of words and syllables.
3. The letters of the alphabet.

The lecturer gave various illustrations of ideograms and phonograms from the Chinese and Egyptian writing, and explained the nature of the Egyptian system of phonetics and determinatives. After giving a brief account of the syllabic writing which was developed in Japan out of the Chinese, and in Cyprus out of the Cuneiform, he went on to explain De Rougé's discovery of the mode in which the Semites had selected 22 letters out of the 400 Egyptian hieroglyphics, and thus formed that first alphabet, which had been the parent of all the alphabets of the world. By the aid of diagrams the lecturer traced the history of each letter of the English alphabet. He began by showing how the letter A was originally the picture of an eagle, B of a crane, M of an owl, L of a lion, and so on with the rest. He then exhibited the transition from the Hieroglyphic forms to the Hieratic forms found in the "Papyrus Prisse," the oldest book in the world, older than Abraham. He next explained how the alphabet on the Moabite stone, and that on the tomb of Eshmunazar, king of Sidon, were derived from the Hieratic writing of the "Papyrus Prisse." The lecturer then passed on to the development, from the Phœnician letters, of the early Greek, Etruscan, and Latin alphabets, beginning with the letters scrawled on the leg of the Colossus at Abousimbul, in Nubia,

by Greek mercenaries in the service of Psammetichus, B.C. 617. He then showed how our modern written and printed alphabets had arisen out of the Roman letters, and, after a brief account of the Sanskrit and the Runic alphabets, and of the routes by which they might respectively have reached India and Scandinavia, he stated that all the alphabets of the world might thus be traced, by means of the Moabite stone, to their ultimate source in the Egyptian hieroglyphics.

He spoke in the next place of the powerful influence which had been exerted on the spread of alphabets by the three great missionary religions,—Buddhism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism; showing how Buddhism had spread the Asoka alphabet over India, Ceylon, Tibet, and Java; and how the Nestorian schism had carried one form of the Syriac alphabet over the plains of Central Asia to the wall of China, while the rise of Islam had caused another local Syriac alphabet, that of Cufa, to be the parent of the Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Hindustani forms of writing.

He went on to explain the causes of alphabetic change :—

1. Those due to the nature of writing materials,—clay, stone, papyrus, parchment, palm-leaves.

2. Indolence in the writer.

3. Need of legibility.

He showed in detail how certain letters had been modified in form by the influence of these causes, and gave some curious illustrations from the forms of the modern Arabic letters. He then pointed out the reasons which had caused the order of the letters to be changed in different alphabets, and concluded by stating that in the so-called Arabic numerals, 1, 2, 3, 4, &c., we have still in daily use, in a most archaic form, the first ten letters of the primitive Semitic alphabet. In illustration of this statement he showed in detail how the figures 2, 5, 7, and 8 are nothing but modifications of the letters B, E, Z, and H.

The CHAIRMAN.—I am sure all will unite in thanking Mr. Isaac Taylor for his address; he has been compelled to compress into an hour and a half matter which would afford ample material for a book. I do not think I shall be singular if I say that I have listened with much admiration to the way in which Mr. Taylor has given us in that short space of time what might fill a volume of considerable size.

A MEMBER.—We know that many of our missionaries have introduced alphabets to different nations, and I believe that a missionary in North America has introduced a syllabic system of great simplicity, for the purpose of teaching reading and writing to new tribes to whom the Gospel is to be preached.

Mr. TAYLOR.—As a simple test of the usefulness of a syllabic system, I may point out that the Japanese are now proposing to replace their own syllabic writing by the English alphabet. As you multiply your forms and symbols it becomes more and more difficult to distinguish between them. If you have fifty or sixty syllables to be represented by separate symbols, the symbols will be either so much alike as to be difficult to distinguish, or so complicated as to be tedious to write, and difficult to remember.

Sir GEORGE CAMPBELL, M.P.—I have been much interested in the address which Mr. Taylor has given us, but with regard to the Arabic I do not think he has brought out very clearly, to those who are not acquainted with it, the direct connection of that with the original Phœnician. He describes Arabic as a succession of strokes and dots, the dots being necessary in order to distinguish the strokes from each other. Now, I have had some practice in it, and I know that, as a written character, it has some great advantages over our own, and is written with greater facility and quickness. Perhaps Mr. Taylor will be good enough to give us some further explanation of the connection between the Arabic alphabet and the original Phœnician alphabet. Then I fear Mr. Taylor has done but scant justice to the Sanskrit alphabet—that admirable and excellent and expressive alphabet, one of the best in the world—in treating it as a mere sub-branch of one of the great families of alphabets. I think that in its development, not only of the simple consonants, but of the aspirated and double consonants and vowels, we may find much that is both interesting and excellent. My impression is that the Sanskrit alphabet may be more easily traced to the Phœnician, but with regard to the Arabic I do not see the connection.

Mr. TAYLOR.—I only mentioned the Arabic as an example of facility in writing, and it is obvious that what is easy to write is often difficult to read. As to the Sanskrit alphabet, I had no time to dwell on its merits, but merely alluded to its derivation from the Semitic alphabet. The exact stages of the affiliation are still disputed amongst scholars. As to its perfection, no doubt it is beautifully perfect in theory, but its typographical signs are numbered up to 328, and I should like to know whether a newspaper, such as the *Times*, could possibly be printed under such a system. The difficulty of distinguishing between the numerous types is so great that Sanskrit scholars correct their proofs by means of reference numbers referring to the types, instead of actually writing the letter in the margin of their proof-sheets.

Sir GEORGE CAMPBELL.—My experience is that Arabic is not at all difficult to learn or to write, nor is it difficult to read. But the great question which I wished to raise was whether there is proof that the Arabic is a derived alphabet, and does not come from an independent source?

Mr. TAYLOR.—I think there is no doubt at all of that. It clearly comes from the Aramaic, through the Palmyrene, which is an alphabet written at Palmyra in the time of Zenobia. We have many inscriptions in that alphabet, and it can be affiliated through the Hauran alphabet to the alphabet

written at Cufa, which again was the parent of the Naskhi or modern Arabic. I do not think there is any doubt about that ; in fact, I believe it is undisputed.

The CHAIRMAN.—As the subject of a missionary alphabet has been mentioned, I may point out that we have an instance of one dating from ten centuries back. Two Greek monks, Cyril and Methodius, endeavoured to adapt the Greek characters to the Slavonic language. Their alphabet contains forty-eight letters, and is very complicated and artificial. Peter the Great reduced the number of letters to thirty-five, and that missionary alphabet, so adapted, is now used to represent the complicated sounds of the Russian language. Any one who has attempted to master Russian will admit that the alphabet is not easy to acquire, partly owing to the numerous different sounds which have to be dealt with, and partly owing to the character of the Cyrillic alphabet. Whatever we may say of the Slavs, one thing is to be wished, namely, that they had framed a better alphabet.

Rev. H. A. HALL.—There is a link in the history of our language which is undeveloped—I mean that which conveys it to a particular neighbourhood. On the Baltic Sea there is a class of persons, by some called misguided, by others heretical, who say they are descended from the lost ten tribes. I should like to know whether there is anything possible in that notion, or whether it is absurd ?

Mr. TAYLOR.—Any notion may be considered possible, if there is any evidence in its favour, but where we have no evidence at all, the best thing is to say nothing about our notions. But I fully admit that if you compare the Runic letters with the Semitic, you will find a remarkable resemblance in almost every case ; so that it is a thousand to one in favour of the Scandinavian letters not being independently invented, but borrowed.

Mr. HALL.—Mr. Taylor has pointed out the trade route from the Black Sea to the Baltic over which the Runic alphabet may have travelled. Is it not the case that in the Crimea are found Hebrew cemeteries, with Hebrew inscriptions ; and if there is that route, is it not possible that those who died and were buried in the Crimea may have been part of those who carried the alphabet to the people of Northern Europe ?

Mr. TAYLOR.—That is, I think, hardly possible. The inscriptions in the Crimea are of the Babylonian type of square Hebrew, and are comparatively modern, whereas the earliest Runic inscriptions are somewhat older in date, and wholly different in character. If you go into the matter, I think you will arrive at the result that the Northmen were in possession of their Runes before the Karaïte Jews settled in the Crimea.

The meeting was then adjourned.