

Of the Writing of Records

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.

"Genesis of the Written Word," *CWHN* 12:468

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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. It is also argued that by the very nature of the thing it can only have been the work of a single inventor.

"Genesis of the Written Word," *CWHN* 12:458

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Writing is a thoroughly artificial thing—no more a product of evolution than feathers or water or algebra are. . . . Though writing is as old as history, practical people have never yet got used to it, but like the generality of mankind have persisted in viewing it as a sort of magic, . . . an ornamental accomplishment designed for ostentation rather than for use. It is inconceivable that true writing was ever devised as a tool for these people, let alone *by* them.

The really marvelous things that writing does, the astounding feats of thought-stimulation, thought-preservation, and thought-transmission for which it has always been valued by a small and specialized segment of society, "the scribes," 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. The contents of such documents from the beginning show a complete unawareness, almost a visible contempt, for the real capabilities and uses of writing.

It is another and equally ancient type of document that knows how to prize the true merit of the written word, and it is easy to surmise that this wonderful device came to the human family as a gift from parties unknown whose intent was that it should assist the race in a sort of cosmic bookkeeping. At any rate, that actually is the principal use to which the instrument has been put since the beginning of that history which it alone has made possible.

"The Way of the Church," *CWHN* 4:245-47

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The earliest uses of writing for the keeping of accounts are in temple records—sacred things—and right along with them go the ritual texts, with an equal claim to antiquity and a far greater claim to the attention of those priests who have always been the peculiar custodians of the written word. . . .

And when . . . a reader takes it upon himself to convey to others the words of the ancients, he himself becomes a part of the transmission machine—its most vital element, in fact. As far as the general public is concerned, the

effectiveness of the miraculous and age-old machine for thought-transmission depends entirely on the man who is operating it.

“The Way of the Church,” CWHN 4:247-48

If language followed natural laws, then the area of intuition might be reduced to nothing and a machine for perfect translation be devised. But one of the greatest charms of language is that it may be used waywardly, wantonly, whimsically, ironically, subtly, inanely, or literally to any degree which a writer chooses—and it is the greatest masters of language that take the most liberties with it. . . . Thus, in an endless antiphonal, the spirit rebukes the letter, and the letter checks the spirit, and by the time the machine has caught up with the mind, the mind is already two jumps ahead of it. . . .

The languages men speak today are much harder than they ever need to be; . . . people like it that way, and . . . they find language devoid of challenge to be tasteless to the point of nausea. After all, language, as its name tells us, is something that is on the tongue—it must have flavor and a body, or we spit it out. . . .

The value of a language is not to be measured by its efficiency. The greatest languages are the hardest. . . . Language does more than fill a need for elementary communication. It is mankind’s other world, a dream world, the playing field, the parade ground, the shady retreat, the laboratory, the theater, the forum, the mirror of the cosmos. We must allow it infinite scope and infinite ambition. Along with that it is also a tool, a means of communication of man, not only with his fellows but also with himself.

“The Way of the Church,” CWHN 4:256-59

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?

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 development exists outside of the theory itself?

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?

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

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

Whence the unfailing identification of reading and writing with divination, that is, with interpreting the will of heaven?

“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. Why then does he insist that the first true writing, the product of an unconscious, mindless, “automatic” process “*can* contain only very trivial matters”? Could anything so “*Wunderbares und Geheimnisvolles*” (wonderful and mysterious) have been invented in a humdrum way for purely humdrum purposes?

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?

“Genesis of the Written Word,” *CWHN* 12:478-79

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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* (coat of arms) has no meaning without reference to the official heraldic lists. . . . 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.

“Genesis of the Written Word,” *CWHN* 12:471

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The burning of books is a stock motif of real history. Ray Bradbury’s novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, tells of a time in the future when the government and people of the United States systematically destroy all books, which are the disturbing element in a world dedicated to TV and the avoidance of serious thinking.

But the author misses the main point: the books that are burned are not the sacred depository of which we have been speaking, but the books in the college “Survey of Western Civilization,” a second-growth at best, a covering of beautiful fire-weed that sprang up on the ashes of the holy books that had been burned by the very schoolmen who now sponsor their successors.

The question right now is not whether the sad and moving chorus of the “Great Books,” all admittedly groping in the dark, can answer the great questions of life (by their own admission they cannot), but whether there ever were books that could do so, a lost library that they replaced. Joseph Smith was aware of the blank emptiness that exists between modern man and any such writings.

“A Strange Thing in the Land,” *CWHN* 2:130-31