

The Early Christians

Writing, Travel, and Letters Among the Early Christians Many writers on many occasions have perceived and described the important part which intercommunication between the widely separated congregations of early Christians, whether by travel or by letter, played in determining the organization and cementing the unity of the Universal Church. Yet perhaps all has not been said that ought to be said on the subject. The marvelous skill and mastery, with which all the resources of the existing civilization were turned to their own purposes by St. Paul and by the Christians generally, may well detain our attention for a brief space. Traveling and correspondence by letter are mutually dependent. Letters are unnecessary until traveling begins: much of the usefulness and profit of traveling depends on the possibility of communication between those who are separated from one another. Except in the simplest forms, commerce and negotiation between different nations, which are among the chief incentives to traveling in early times, cannot be carried out without some method of registering thoughts and information, so as to be understood by persons at a distance. Hence communication by letter has been commonly practiced from an extremely remote antiquity. The knowledge of and readiness in writing leads to correspondence between friends who are not within speaking distance of one another, as inevitably as the possession of articulate speech produces conversation and discussion. In order to fix the period when epistolary correspondence first began, it would be necessary to discover at what period the art of writing became common. Now the progress of discovery in recent years has revolutionized opinion on this subject. The old views, which we all used to assume as self-evident, that writing was invented at a comparatively late period in human history, that it was long known only to a few persons, and that it was practiced even by them only slowly and with difficulty on some special occasions and for some peculiarly important purposes, are found to be utterly erroneous. No one who possesses any knowledge of early history would now venture to make any positive assertion as to the date when writing was invented, or when it began to be widely used in the Mediterranean lands. The progress of discovery reveals the existence of various systems of writing at a remote period, and shows that they were familiarly used for the ordinary purposes of life and administration, and were not reserved, as scholars used to believe, for certain sacred purposes of religion and ritual. The discovery that writing was familiarly used in early time has an important bearing on the early literature of the Mediterranean peoples. For example, no scholar would now employ the argument that the composition of the Iliad and the Odyssey must belong to a comparatively late day, because such great continuous poems could not come into existence without the ready use of writing--an argument which formerly seemed to tell strongly against the early date assigned by tradition for their origin. The scholars who championed the traditional date of those great works used to answer that argument by attempting to prove that they were composed and preserved by memory alone without the aid of writing. The attempt could not be successful. The scholar in his study, accustomed to deal with words and not with realities, might persuade himself that by this ingenious verbal reasoning he had got rid of the difficulty; but those who could not blind themselves to the facts of the world felt that the improbability still remained, and acquiesced in this reasoning only as the least among a choice of evils. The progress of discovery has placed the problem in an entirely new light. The difficulty originated in our ignorance. The art of writing was indeed required as an element in the complex social platform on which the Homeric poems were built up; but no doubt can now be entertained that writing was known and familiarly practiced in the East Mediterranean lands long before the date to which Greek tradition assigned the composition of the two great poems. A similar argument was formerly used by older scholars to prove that the Hebrew literature belonged to a later period than the Hebrew tradition allowed; but the more recent scholars who advocate the late date of that literature would no longer allow such reasoning, and frankly admit that their views must be supported on other grounds; though it may be doubted whether they have abandoned as thoroughly as they profess the old prejudice in favor of a late date for any long literary composition, or have fully realized how readily and familiarly writing was used in extremely remote time, together with all that is implied by that familiar use. The prejudice still exists, and it affects the study of both Hebrew and Christian literature. In the first place, there is a general feeling that it is more prudent to bring down the composition of any ancient work to the latest date that evidence permits. But this feeling rests ultimately on the fixed idea that people have gradually become more familiar with the art of writing as the world grows older, and that the composition of a work of literature should not, without distinct and conclusive proof, be attributed to an early period. In the second place, there is also a very strong body of opinion that the earliest Christians wrote little or nothing. It is supposed that partly they were either unable to write, or at least unused to the familiar employment of writing for the purposes of ordinary life; partly they were so entirely taken up with the idea of the immediate coming of the Lord that they never thought it necessary to record for future generations the circumstances of the life and death of Jesus, until lapse of long years on the one hand had shown that the Lord's coming was not to be expected immediately, and that for the use of the already large Church some record was required of those events round which its faith and hope centered, while on the other hand it had obscured the memory and disturbed the true tradition of those important facts. This opinion also rests on and derives all its influence from the same inveterate prejudice that, at the period in question, writing was still something great and solemn, and that it was used, not in the ordinary course of human everyday life and experience, but only for some grave purpose of legislation, government, or religion, intentionally registering certain weighty principles or important events for the benefit of future generations. Put aside that prejudice, and the whole body of opinion which maintains that the Christians at first did not set anything down in writing about the life and death of Christ--strong and widely accepted as it is, dominating as a fundamental premise much of the discussion of this whole subject in recent times--is devoid of any support. But most discussions with regard to the origin, force, and spirit of the New Testament are founded on certain postulates and certain initial presumptions, which already contain implicit the whole train of reasoning that follows, and which in fact beg the whole question at starting. If those postulates are true, or if they are granted by the reader, then the whole series of conclusions follows with unerring and impressive logical sequence. All the more necessary, then, is it to examine very

carefully the character of such postulates, and to test whether they are really true about that distant period, or are only modern fallacies springing from the mistaken views about ancient history that were widely accepted in the eighteenth and most part of the nineteenth century. One of those initial presumptions, plausible in appearance and almost universally assumed and conceded, is that there was no early registration of the great events in the beginning of Christian history. This presumption we must set aside as a mere prejudice, contrary to the whole character and spirit of that age, and entirely improbable; though, of course, decisive disproof of it is no longer possible, for the only definite and complete disproof would be the production of the original documents in which the facts were recorded at the moment by contemporaries. But so much may be said at once, summing up in a sentence the result which arises from what is stated in the following pages. So far as antecedent probability goes, founded on the general character of preceding and contemporary Greek or Graeco-Asiatic society, the first Christian account of the circumstances connected with the death of Jesus must be presumed to have been written in the year when Jesus died. But the objection will doubtless be made at once--If that be so, how can you account for such facts as that Mark says that the Crucifixion was completed by the third hour of the day (9 a.m., according to our modern reckoning of time), while John says that the sentence upon Jesus was only pronounced about the sixth hour, i.e. at noon. The reply is obvious and unhesitating. The difference dates from the event itself. Had evidence been collected that night or next morning, the two diverse opinions would have been observed and recorded, already hopelessly discrepant and contradictory. One was the opinion of the ordinary people of that period, unaccustomed to note the lapse of time or to define it accurately in thought or speech: such persons loosely indicated the temporal sequence of three great events, the Crucifixion, the beginning and the end of the darkness, by assigning them to the three great successive divisions of the day--the only divisions which they were in the habit of noticing or mentioning--the third, sixth, and ninth hours. Ordinary witnesses in that age would have been nonplused, if they had been closely questioned whether full three hours had elapsed between the Crucifixion and the beginning of the darkness, and would have regarded such minuteness as unnecessary pedantry, for they had never been trained by the circumstances of life to accuracy of thought or language in regard to the lapse of time. Witnesses of that class are the authority for the account which is preserved in the three Synoptic Gospels. We observe that throughout the Gospels of Mark and Luke only the three great divisions of the day--the third, sixth and ninth hours--are mentioned. Matthew once mentions the eleventh hour (20:9); but there his expression does not show superior accuracy in observation, for he is merely using a proverbial expression to indicate that the allotted season had almost elapsed. A very precise record of time is contained in the Bezan Text of Acts 19:9; "from the fifth to the tenth hour"; but this is found only in two MSS, and is out of keeping with Luke's ordinary looseness in respect of time and chronology; and it must therefore be regarded as an addition made by a second century editor, who either had access to a correct source of information, or explained the text in accordance with the regular customs of Graeco-Roman society. The other statement, which is contained in the Fourth Gospel, records the memory of an exceptional man, who through a certain idiosyncrasy was observant and careful in regard to the lapse of time, who in other cases noted and recorded accurate divisions of time like the seventh hour and the tenth hour (John 1:39, 4:16, 4:52). This man, present at the trial of Jesus, had observed the passage of time, which was unnoticed by others. The others would have been astonished if any one had pointed out that noon had almost come before the trial was finished. He alone marked the sun and estimated the time, with the same accuracy as made him see and remember that the two disciples came to the house of Jesus about the tenth hour, that Jesus sat on the well about the sixth hour, that the fever was said to have left the child about the seventh hour. All those little details, entirely unimportant in themselves, were remembered by a man naturally observant of time, and recorded for not other reason than that he had been present and had seen or heard. It is a common error to leave too much out of count the change that has been produced on popular thought and accuracy of conception and expression by the habitual observation of the lapse of time according to hours and minutes. The ancients had no means of observing precisely the progress of time. They could as a rule only make a rough guess as to the hour. There was not even a name for any shorter division of time than the hour. There were no watches, and only in the rarest and most exceptional cases were there any public and generally accessible instruments for noting and making visible the lapse of time during the day. The sun-dial was necessarily an inconvenient recorder, not easy to observe. Consequently looseness in regard to the passage of time is deep-seated in ancient thought and literature, especially Greek. The Romans, with their superior endowment for practical facts and ordinary statistics, were more careful, and the effect can be traced in their literature. The lapse of time hour by hour was often noted publicly in great Roman households by the sound of a trumpet or some other device, though the public still regarded this as a rather overstrained refinement--for why should one be anxious to know how fast one's life was ebbing away? Such was the usual point of view, as is evident in Petronius. Occasionally individuals in the Greek-speaking provinces of the East were more accurate in the observation of time, either owing to their natural temperament, or because they were more receptive of the Roman habit of accuracy. On the other hand, the progress of invention has made almost every one in modern times as careful and accurate about time as even the exceptionally accurate in ancient times, because we are all trained from infancy to note the time by minutes, and we suffer loss or inconvenience occasionally from an error in observation. The use of the trumpeter after the Roman fashion to proclaim the lapse of time is said to have been kept up until recently in the old imperial city of Goslar, where, in accordance with the more minute accuracy characteristic of modern thought and custom, he sounded every quarter of an hour. But it does not follow that, because the ancients were not accustomed to note the progress of the hours, therefore they were less habituated to use the art of writing. It is a mere popular fallacy, entirely unworthy of scholars, to suppose that people became gradually more familiar with writing and more accustomed to use it habitually in ordinary life as time progressed and history continued. The contrary is the case; at a certain period, and to a certain degree, the ancients were accustomed to use the art familiarly and readily; but at a later time writing passed out of ordinary use and became restricted to a few who used it only as a lofty possession for great purposes. It is worth while to mention one striking example to give emphasis to the fact that, as the Roman Empire decayed, familiarity with the use of writing disappeared

from society, until it became the almost exclusive possession of a few persons, who were for the most part connected with religion. About the beginning of the sixth century before Christ, a body of mercenary soldiers, Greeks, Carians, etc., marched far away up the Nile towards Ethiopia and the Sudan in the service of an Egyptian king. Those hired soldiers of fortune were likely, for the most part, to belong to the least educated section of Greek society; and, even where they had learned in childhood to write, the circumstances of their life were not of a kind likely to make writing a familiar and ordinary matter to them, or to render its exercise a natural method of whiling away an idle hour. Yet on the stones and the colossal statues at Abu Simble many of them wrote, not merely their name and legal designation, but also accounts of the expedition on which they were engaged, with its objects and its progress. Such was the state of education in a rather humble stratum of Greek society six centuries before Christ. Let us come down eleven centuries after Christ, to the time when great armies of Crusaders were marching across Asia Minor on their way to Palestine. Those armies were led by the noblest of their peoples, by statesmen, warriors, and great ecclesiastics. They contained among them persons of all classes, burning with zeal for a great idea, pilgrims at once and soldiers, with numerous priests and monks. Yet, so far as I am aware, not one single written memorial of all those crusading hosts has been found in the whole country. On a rock beside the lofty castle of Butrentum, commanding the approach to the great pass of the Cilician Gates--that narrow gorge which they called the Gate of Judas, because it was the enemy of their faith and the betrayer of their cause--there are engraved many memorials of their presence; but none are written; all are mere marks in the form of crosses. In that small body of mercenaries who passed by Abu Simbel 600 years before Christ, there were probably more persons accustomed to use familiarly the art of writing than in all the hosts of the Crusaders; for, even to those Crusaders who had learned to write, the art was far from being familiar, and they were not wont to use it in their ordinary everyday life, though they might on great occasions. In those 1700 years the Mediterranean world had passed from light to darkness, from civilization to barbarism, so far as writing was concerned. Only recently are we beginning to realize how civilized in some respects was mankind in that earlier time, and to free ourselves from many unfounded prejudices and prepossessions about the character of ancient life and society. The cumbrousness of the materials on which ancient writing was inscribed may seem unfavorable to its easy or general use. But it must be remembered that, except in Egypt, no material that was not of the most durable character has been or could have been preserved. All writing-materials more ephemeral than stone, bronze, or terra-cotta, have inevitably been destroyed by natural causes. Only in Egypt the extreme dryness of climate and soil has enabled paper to survive. Now the question must suggest itself whether there is any reason to think that more ephemeral materials for writing were never used by the ancient Mediterranean peoples generally. Was Egypt the only country in which writers used such perishable materials? The question can be answered only in one way. There can be no doubt that the custom, which obtained in the Greek lands in the period best known to us, had come down from remote antiquity: that custom was to make a distinction between the material on which documents of national interest and public character were written and that on which mere private documents of personal or literary interest were written. The former, such as laws, decrees and other State documents, which were intended to be made as widely known as possible, were engraved in one or two copies on tablets of the most imperishable character and preserved or exposed in some public place: this was the ancient way of attaining the publicity which in modern time is got by printing large numbers of copies on ephemeral material. But those public copies were not the only ones made; there is no doubt that such documents were first of all written on some perishable material, usually on paper. In the case of private documents, as a rule, no copies were made except on perishable materials. Wills of private persons, indeed, are often found engraved on marble or other lasting material; these were exposed in the most public manner over the graves that lined the great highways leading out from the cities; but wills were quasi-public documents in the classical period, and had been entirely public documents at an earlier time, according to their original character as records of a public act affecting the community and acquiesced in by the whole body. Similarly, it can hardly be doubted that, in a more ancient period of Greek society, documents which were only of a private character and of personal or literary interest were likely to be recorded on more perishable substances than graver State documents. This view, of course, can never be definitely and absolutely proved, for the only complete proof would be the discovery of some of those old private documents, which in the nature of the case have decayed and disappeared. But the known facts leave no practical room for doubt. Paper was in full use in Egypt, as a finished and perfect product, in the fourth millennium before Christ. In Greece it is incidentally referred to by Herodotus as in ordinary use during the fifth century BC. At what date it began to be used there no evidence exists; but there is every probability that it had been imported from Egypt for a long time; and Herodotus says that, before paper came into use on the Ionian coast, skins of animals were used for writing. On these and other perishable materials the letters and other commonplace documents of private persons were written. Mr. Arthur J. Evans has found at Cnossos in Crete "ink-written inscriptions on vases," as early as 1800 or 2000 years BC; and he has inferred from this "the existence of writings on papyrus or other perishable materials" in that period, since ink would not be made merely for writing on terra-cotta vases (though the custom of writing in ink on pottery, especially on ostraka or fragments of broken vases, as being cheap, persisted throughout the whole period of ancient civilization). Accordingly, though few private letters older than the imperial time have been preserved, it need not and should not be supposed that there were only a few written. Those that were written have been lost because the material on which they were written could not last. If we except the correspondence of Cicero, the great importance of which caused it to be preserved, hardly any ancient letters not intended for publication by their writers have come down to us except in Egypt, where the original paper has in a number of cases survived. But the voluminous correspondence of Cicero cannot be regarded as a unique fact of Roman life. He and his correspondents wrote so frequently to one another, because letter-writing was then common in Roman society. Cicero says that, when he was separated from his friend Atticus, they exchanged their thought as freely by letter as they did by conversation when they were in the same place. Such a sentiment was not peculiar to one individual: it expressed a custom of contemporary society. The truth is that, just as in human nature thought and speech are linked together in such a way that (to use the expression of Plato)

word is spoken thought and thought is unspoken word, so also human beings seek by the law of their nature to express their ideas permanently in writing as well as momentarily in speech; and ignorance of writing in any race points rather to a degraded and degenerate than to a truly primitive condition.

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