

I am ready now to discuss in a couple of posts the issue of whether Jesus' brother James actually wrote the book of James, or if it was someone else wanting his readers to *think* it was him. To make sense of what I want to say about it at the outset (it will take a couple of posts), I've decided I need to re-post an old post on a broader and even more interesting question: who actually *could* write back then? Today most anyone can (just, well, check out the Internet!). But who could in, say, first-century Palestine. It seems so counter-intuitive that many people simply, without looking at any of the evidence, intuitively don't believe it. But the answer is, very, very few people indeed. A tiny slice of a minority. Here is what I said about the matter in the original post (devoted specifically to the question of whether Jesus' disciple Peter could have written 1 Peter).

In his now-classic study of ancient literacy, William Harris gave compelling reasons for thinking that at the best of times in antiquity only 10% or so of the population was able to read [[Ancient Literacy](#); Harvard University Press, 1989]. By far the highest portion of readers was located in urban settings. Widespread literacy like that enjoyed throughout modern societies requires certain cultural and historical forces to enact policies of near universal, or at least extensive, education of the masses. Prior to the industrial revolution, such a thing was neither imagined nor desired. As Meir Bar Ilan notes: "literacy does not emerge in a vacuum but rather from social and historical circumstances."

Moreover, far fewer people in antiquity could compose a writing than could read, as shown by the investigations of Raffaella Cribiore, who stresses that reading and composition were taught as two different skills and at different points of the ancient curriculum. Learning even the basics of reading was a slow and arduous process, typically taking some three years and involving repeating "endless drills" over "long hours." "In sum, a student became accustomed to an incessant gymnastics of the mind." These kinds of "gymnastics" obviously required extensive leisure and money, neither of which could be afforded by any but the wealthy classes. Most students did not progress beyond learning the basics of reading, to the second level of grammar. Training in composition came only after these early stages, and most students did not get to that point: "the ability to articulate one's thoughts in writing was achieved only when much literature had been digested." Especially difficult, and requiring additional training, was acquiring literacy in a second language. Indeed, as, Cribiore points out, "bilingualism did not correspond to biliteracy."

All of these points bear closely on the question of whether an Aramaic-speaking fisherman from rural Galilee could produce a refined Greek composition such as 1 Peter. But before pressing that question, we should ...

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