

I deal with an interesting question in this week's Readers' Mailbag: is it plausible that the apostle John could compose a Gospel in Greek? If you have a question you would like me to address, ask away, and I will add it to my long list!

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QUESTION:

You mention in your book *Forgeries and Counter Forgeries* that John most likely did not write the Gospel attributed to him as he almost certainly could not write in Greek. I seem to remember you writing that the Greek of that Gospel was good and fairly nuanced. However, I am being told by someone who is fairly conversant in these matters that John could easily have learned the Greek necessary to write the Gospel, since he lived for over 60 years on the mission field and that his Greek is the most basic of the NT. Is he right? And if so how would you respond?

RESPONSE

Yes, I get asked this question a lot, or rather, get told this a lot – that if an illiterate Aramaic speaking day-laborer spent a lot of time abroad, he would be able to write a Gospel in a foreign language (it has been established on clear philological grounds that John's Gospel, like the other books of the New Testament, is an original Greek composition, not a translation from Aramaic). It's clear that my thinking about this is not at **all** what (some? many?) other people think. The problem, it seems, is that people have a massive misunderstanding about education levels in the ancient world, and of what people were capable of doing when it came to reading and writing.

To begin with, the New Testament itself indicates that the apostle John was a fisherman by trade. How well educated were fishermen in rural Galilee? We actually have a reliable answer to that. They were not educated at **all**. The vast majority of people in Galilee had zero education. There were not day schools; the only people who got education were urban elites – the wealthy upper crust who lived in major urban areas.

John lived in a tiny rural community where there almost certainly was no school (see my bibliographical references at the end of this post). And as a day laborer from a family of day laborers, he was in the lower classes. He would never have learned his letters, let alone how to read a book, let alone how to copy a book, let alone how to compose a sentence in writing, let alone to compose a book. And that is in his **own** language, which was Aramaic. That is why the New Testament itself indicates that he was "agrammatos," i.e., someone who didn't know his letters, that is, someone who could not read (let alone write; let alone compose a book) (thus Acts 4:13).

Why would any experience he had on the missionary field with people who spoke a different language (Greek) suddenly make him educated, able to read any language, or the language of people he was suddenly living among, or able to compose a sentence in writing in that language, or able to write an entire book in perfectly constructed, even literarily pleasing in places, Greek? I think the problem is that we simply assume that rural day-laborers in ancient Galilee were kind of like our next door neighbors in 21st century America: highly educated people with college degrees who know how to write and who, if they spent say twenty years in a foreign country, would be able to write in that other language. But that's

not how it was at all.

For one thing, there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that John spent any time at all outside of Palestine. Whenever he is mentioned, he is either in Aramaic-speaking Galilee or Jerusalem. But even more important, just because someone spends time in countries speaking a foreign language that doesn't make them qualified to write a *book* in that language.

Here is more what it is like. I have a wonderful house cleaner from Guatemala who has been in the U.S. for about fifteen years. Her English is barely functional, even though she has TV, radio, a computer, access to social media and American movies, and is constantly among English speaking people doing her job. Would she be capable of writing a Gospel about Jesus in English? Good grief -NO! She would not be able to construct more than a very brief and improperly worded sentence or two. And she is far more educated (in her home country) than John was (in his).

Living abroad does not allow a person to become an author. First there has to be a preliminary education, which, in the ancient world, happened only among children of very rich people, and took years. After those years the student needed to learn how to compose writings. That took more years. It was a very long drawn out process. It was only for the rich kids because everyone else had to start working for a living at a very young age.

Could an adult who was uneducated in this way eventually learn to write? Possibly, but we have precisely zero evidence of anything like adult education in the ancient world. And no evidence either, at all, of people being trained in a school setting to write in a second language.

I'm afraid too many people have a completely romantic idea about what education was like in the ancient world, because they think that it must have been roughly analogous to education in the modern world. And partly because they've heard so many fictions about education in Palestine, where allegedly every boy went to a synagogue school to learn to read and write Hebrew. But that's simply not true.

I discuss all of this in my book [Forgery and Counterforgery](#). But no one has to take my word for it. Go to the real experts. It is much better to see what such established scholars who have devoted huge chunks of their research lives to such matters have to say than simply to make some guesses based on some rather romantic hunches about what life might have been like all those years ago.

If you want to learn about literacy in antiquity, the best place to start is Columbia professor William Harris's book [Ancient Literacy](#). If you want to know about how literacy worked in ancient Palestine, go to Catherine Hezser's amazing study, [Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine](#) (she argues that the rates of literacy at the time in Palestine were probably not a lot more than 3%; that is, only 3% or slightly more of the population could read. And that this 3-4% were wealthy urban elites - not rural fishermen). If you want to see how education worked - how children learned to read and write - then read the books on ancient educational systems by Raffaella Cribiore, for example her enlightening [Gymnastics of the Mind](#).

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