

It's been fun for me to look over posts on the blog from years ago. Here is one of relevance to some of my recent comments on the book of Revelation, for two reasons.

One involves literacy: who could read and write? Could John the son of Zebedee?

The other involves "secretaries." Since my Revelation posts, a couple of people have asked me if it's possible that the author used a "secretary" for the book (that is: since John the son of Zebedee couldn't write, maybe he instructed a literate companion to write it for him.) The issue of "secretaries" in early Christianity was the subject of two posts that I made exactly at this time, four years ago. I'll give both posts, since they strike me as of perennial significance (and interest!) Here is what I said back then (as you'll see, in this case the issues involved whether Peter could have written 1 Peter)

IN RESPONSE TO MY POSTS ON SECRETARIES AND THE BOOK OF 1 PETER, SEVERAL PEOPLE HAVE RAISED THE QUESTION OF WHETHER PETER WAS HIMSELF LITERATE (ABLE TO READ, OR MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, TO WRITE). THIS IS THE FIRST PART OF WHAT I SAY IN MY BOOK FORGERY AND COUNTERFORGERY; THE SECOND PART WILL BE IN THE NEXT POST.

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."

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