

Can we Trust the Text of the Bible?

Exhibition and presentations by Dr Trevor R Allin

Session 4: Handout 2

Can We Trust Ancient Writers or Documents?

It is sometimes claimed that the disciples of Christ were ignorant, unsophisticated people. “Peter was just a fisherman”, some people say. (We might ask what a modern fisherman would think of such a dismissive statement!)

However, there is much more than this. Simon Peter and his brother Andrew were running a successful fishing business. We know from one occasion (John 21:11) that they even counted the number of fish that they caught.

They were surrounded by Greek-speaking communities (see Matthew 4:25, Mark 5:20, Mark 7:31) and lived in a culture that was at least bi-lingual (Aramaic and Greek), often tri-lingual (Aramaic, Greek and Hebrew) and in some cases quadri-lingual (Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew and Latin) – see Mark’s use of Latin in Mark 15:39 and 15:44, which can be seen in the Greek but is not obvious in English translations. It is significant that not only did Mark use Latin; he expected his readers and hearers to understand Latin.

Likewise, Jesus expected his opponents not only to understand Latin, but to be able to read it, even though it was written with a different alphabet! See Matthew 22:19-21, Mark 12:15-17, Luke 20:23-25.

These people not only spoke several languages and ran successful businesses with clients who did not speak Aramaic, they could also read and write three different languages, each of which was written in a different alphabet.

Peter’s spoken contributions recorded in the New Testament demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the Old Testament (e.g., Acts 1:20), and he could quote from the Greek translation extensively and with total accuracy from memory. See for instance Acts 2:16-21 and verses 25-28 and verses 34-35. Likewise, his letters reveal an ability to write complex Greek with total accuracy.

Similar comments could be made about all the New Testament writers.

“Chronological Snobbery”

The academic C.S. Lewis used the term “chronological snobbery” to refer to many people’s assumption that people from previous centuries were inherently inferior and what they wrote was less reliable – merely because it took place before our time. This does of course reveal an arrogant assumption that we are better and that modern attitudes and ideas must be right, just because they are newer! (Incidentally, 2,000 years ago some Greeks had a similar attitude – see Acts 17:21.)

Lewis referred to “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited. You must find why it went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this, one passes to the realization that our own age is also “a period,” and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them.”¹

Aldous Huxley is reported to have written, “Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.”² In these lectures we have shared facts.

When we also remember that a major part of teaching followers at the time of Christ was by getting them to memorise what the teacher said, we can see that it is thoroughly reasonable to have confidence that what we have in the New Testament texts accurately recounts what Christ taught and the events that are recorded.

9.4.26. <https://livingwater-spain.com/>

¹ From his book “Surprised by Joy”. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronological_snobbery#:~:text=Chronological%20snobbery%20is%20an%20argument,for%20of%20appeal%20to%20novelty.

² Aldous Huxley, “Proper Studies”, 1927, reproduced in “Complete Essays, Vol. II: 1926-1929”