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Chris Keith, *Jesus' Literacy. Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (Library of New Testament Studies 413 – Library of Historical Jesus Studies 8; London *et al.*: Bloomsbury, 2013). Pp. XVI + 224. GBP 17.99.
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The author serves as Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity, and also Director of the Centre for the Social-Scientific Study of the Bible, at St. Mary's University College, Twickenham, UK. He is the author of two other books: (1) *The* 'Pericope Adulterae', *the Gospel of John and the Literacy of Jesus* (Brill, 2009), a revised version of his doctoral thesis at the University of Edinburgh (April 2008), which earned him the 2010 John Templeton Award for Theological Promise, and (2) *Jesus against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict* (Baker Academic, 2014). The reviewed book addresses the interesting question of whether Jesus himself could read and write, and it is worth noting that *Jesus' Literacy* is the first book-length treatment of this topic. The idea for this work stemmed from the time of Keith's doctoral research, when he realized that, in the NT account of the woman caught in adultery, the question of *whether* Jesus could actually write was equally pertinent for modern readers as the question of *what* Jesus wrote in the dirt (cf. John 8:6.8). The main stance of Keith's *Jesus' Literacy* is that Jesus most likely did not possess the level of literacy known as a scribal literacy, but nevertheless managed to convince many among his audiences that he did. At the same time, Keith's argument "does not require that Jesus *intended* to convince his audiences that he was a scribal-literate teacher, only that he did convince them" (p. 26).

The book consists of a foreword, introduction, five chapters, and concluding remarks. In the introductory chapter, Keith outlines the main contributions of his work (which are repeated in the final part of the book) and addresses the motivating factors behind both scholarly and popular interest in the topic of Jesus' literacy. At the outset, however, he deals with two key questions: Why did Jesus never write a book? and Why does Jesus' literacy matter? The fact that Jesus did not author texts was already discussed in antiquity

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(e.g. Augustine, Jerome). Among some common opinions about this is one which claims that if Jesus had in fact composed and passed down any writing, it would have become a fetish and we would have witnessed the birth of bibliolatry (W.E. Sangster 1932). Within present biblical scholarship such devotional stances have been rather discarded, however, as the focus of academic interest has shifted toward the question of whether Jesus *could* have written a book. In the last few decades, authors dealing with Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity have made impressive advances toward answering questions such as "who could read and write, how many could read and write, how one learned to read and write, and the role of literacy in the distribution of power" (p. 2). One of Keith's original contributions to this scholarship is to show how new, well-wrought answers to these questions bear upon the figure of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. In his introductory remarks, Keith also demonstrates that the question of Jesus' literacy matters because literacy equaled power and prestige. If Jesus is a Jewish teacher – and there is no doubt about this claim – then the question arises as to what *kind* of Jewish teacher Jesus was. Keith's book grapples with crafting the most plausible answer to this question. Another of Keith's major contributions to the scholarly debate is the attention he gives to the different *degrees* of literacy seen in the Jewish world of Jesus' time. Thus, by asking the question about Jesus' literacy, one is forced to ask the question about the degree and the type of his literacy. In the introduction Keith also notes that while for some people the topic of Jesus' literacy is insignificant or even "ridiculous" (e.g. J.P. Meier 1991), others care about it quite intensely, falsely assuming that the answer bears upon assumptions about Jesus' identity. In fact, literacy or illiteracy has nothing to do with someone's intelligence, and consequently, in Jesus' case, has no bearing upon Christological claims. As Keith aptly notes, whereas literacy is the norm in the modern industrialized world, in the ancient world it was not.

Chapter 1 provides the *status quaestions* on the issue of Jesus' literacy or illiteracy. Scholars are divided on this question, surprisingly appealing to the same socio-historical milieu of Jesus and even to the same biblical passages (Mark 6:3; Luke 4:16; John 7:15). From the outset, Keith deems both terms "literate" and "illiterate" unhelpful due to their lack of precision. As he states: "Such classifications do not accurately reflect the literacy landscape of Roman Judea where individuals could hold different levels of literacy with different literate skills implied, and in different languages" (p. 8-9). Those scholars who claim that Jesus was literate to some degree refer to Jesus' socio-historical context where, it is presumed, virtually all Jewish boys went to *bet sefer* and *bet talmud (midrash)* where they would

have learned the Scriptures and the Hebrew language. Some scholars (e.g. R. Riesner 1980, 2004; B. Witherington 1997) argue that Jesus could have learned how to read and write in his pious home and through his participation in synagogue, as well as during pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Pointing to the scriptural evidence for Jesus' literacy, scholars invoke (1) Luke 4:16-20, which presents Jesus reading the scroll of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Nazareth synagogue; (2) John 7:15, which rules out any formal scribal training yet indicates that Jesus held some degree of literate ability; (3) texts where Jesus asks his opponents "Have you not read?"; (4) the title "Rabbi" applied to Jesus by his followers; (5) Jesus' many references to the Scriptures; and (6) Mark 6:3, which presents Jesus as an educated carpenter. In affirming that Jesus was able to write, scholars can cite only John 8:6.8. Conversely, the assertion that Jesus was illiterate also has a long tradition, since already in the third century C.E. Celsus regarded Jesus as an uneducated carpenter. Modern scholars – in the wake of studies on the ancient phenomenon of orality conducted by W.H. Kebler (*The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 1983) and W.V. Harris (*Ancient Literacy*, 1989) – argue that Jesus was a speaker, an oral sage, but not a scribe. Appealing to the very same socio-historical context, some authors argue that Jesus was illiterate since he was a Galilean peasant. Jesus' illiteracy is also asserted by referring to Mark 6:3 (which identifies Jesus as a carpenter), John 7:15 (an explicit indication of Jesus' lack of education) and Luke 4:16 (where Jesus' taking up the Isaiah scroll is understood as a performance rather than actually reading from the text). Such a confused *status quaestionis* led Keith to abandon the resulting simplistic dichotomy (literate/illiterate) and instead search for another approach to the issue, a search explicated in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 deals with methodological issues. Keith demonstrates the dissatisfaction with the use of the criteria of authenticity in the studies on the historical Jesus, which resulted in some rejecting the criteria (as did, e.g., D.C. Allison) and focusing on the impact of Jesus (see E. Schüssler Fiorenza, J.D.G. Dunn, L. Hurtado, R. Bauckham) and also on the social memory theory. Keith's study, abandoning the dominant criteria approach, adopted a Jesus-memory approach, in one of its two forms, namely the continuity perspective, being "interested in how early Christians preserved, commemorated, and interpreted the past of Jesus in light of that past and their present" (p. 61).

In chapter 3, focusing on six factors – widespread illiteracy, widespread textuality, spectrums of literacy, scribal literacy, the acquisition of biblical knowledge, and the perception of literacy – Keith depicts the varieties of literacy and scribal culture in Roman Palestine in the first century C.E. One

of Keith's important methodological statements, which opens this chapter, says that the "primary purpose of this chapter is to establish an appropriate background for understanding the diverse *claims* for Jesus' literacy in early Christianity's corporate memory. The primary purpose is not, therefore, to establish a historical context" (p. 71-72). With respect to this context, Keith deems the past scholarly approach too simplistic and somehow wrong, as exemplified in the following reasoning: "most Jewish boys" went to school, *therefore* Jesus did too, and "most Jewish peasants" were illiterate, *therefore* Jesus was too (p. 72). The evidence, namely the nonexistence of a widely diffused, publicly funded elementary educational system, attests a lack of widespread literacy in first-century Judaism. In this context, it is worth recalling that literacy rates in the Roman Empire probably never rose above 10 percent (W.V. Harris 1989), and Roman Palestine does not seem to be an exception to this estimate. Indeed, with regard to first-century Palestinian Judaism, some scholars even suggest a rate of three percent (Meir Bar Ilan 1992) or five percent (J. Dewey 1999). Introducing to his inquiry the concept of textuality, which does not imply the acquisition of literacy skills, Keith rejects the common notion that Palestinian Judaism must have been literate based on its religious commitment to sacred texts. But as Keith points out, "religious devotion did not require literate education; and literate education was not practical in an agrarian culture" (p. 81). Next, Keith demonstrates the incorrectness of the literate/illiterate dichotomy, since there were many gradations of literacy which consisted of various different literate skills (e.g. semi-literacy, signature literacy, and illiterate yet textual Jews as in the case of the famous Babatha), different languages (Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, and Nabatean), and different social/professional manifestations of those skills, for example, the difference between the scribal literacy and a craftsman's literacy. Since *Jesus' Literacy* is concerned with Jesus' scribal-literate status, the matter of Jesus' language(s) did not occupy the author. In Keith's opinion, "Almost all first-century Palestinian Jews were textual, but the majority were illiterate or semi-literate, possessing signature literacy at best" (p. 107). Keith pays attention to the often overlooked fact that "reading and writing were separately taught and acquired skills, and ability in one did not necessarily imply ability in the other" (p. 93). In both writing and reading (the latter probably much more common among Second Temple literates) there existed different levels of proficiency, e.g., the spectrum of grapho-literacy (writing) skills: "tracing words; copying or taking dictation; crafting rhetorical units; and authoring an original text" (p. 105). As for the reading of the Torah proficiently, it was a skill achieved only by a minority educated elite. Keith, however, does not explain how his statement about the elite's ability to read

proficiently – and thus being allowed to read publicly – can be reconciled with the notion (which he seems to accept) that scriptural readings constituted an integral part of synagogue worship (p. 100). Accepting the existence of synagogues, even in the rural areas of Galilee, in the late Second Temple period, synagogue liturgical readings and their exposition must have been a common phenomenon in Jesus' time. If this is the case, then Jesus, even as a craftsman and a peasant, might have had contact with a person responsible for such readings and their interpretation, for example, a scribal-literate synagogue attendant. Consequently, it is my own hypothetical claim that Jesus could have learned from and studied with such a person (or persons), ultimately achieving a level of scribal literacy. My foregoing reasoning is valid, however (likewise my reservations to Keith's argumentation), only if any synagogue actually existed in Jesus' hometown or, put another way, if synagogues were fairly widespread in Galilee in Jesus' time, and if the village synagogue attendants possessed a level of scribal literacy. In fact, Keith is aware of such a hypothetical possibility when he states that even if we agree that Jesus was likely illiterate, because most people were illiterate (a social-historical approach to the issue), history always knows exceptions to the rule. That is, affirming that the vast majority of Jews at the time of Jesus were illiterate does not automatically mean that Jesus had to be illiterate too (p. 168).

Chapter 4 discusses the primary evidence concerning Jesus' literacy, which is Christian memories. It focuses prominently upon first-century sources (i.e. Gospel traditions) but also includes evidence from the second to sixth centuries. Keith's specific focus on Jesus' scribal-literate status led to his excluding texts referring only to a functional level of literacy (Mk 12:16//Mt 22:20). In the same vein, Keith does not discuss Jesus' question: "Have you never read?" (Mk 2:25 par.; Mk 12:10 par.; Mk 12:26 par.; Mt 12:5; 19:4-5; Lk 12:26), which does not necessarily imply that Jesus himself read any texts. Keith's original contribution in this chapter consists in discussing some synoptic texts (Mk 1:21-22 par.; Mk 6:1-6 par.) as witnesses of "an intra-Christian debate over Jesus' proper location in a synagogue service" (p. 125). From one side, Jesus' teaching in synagogues is an activity exclusively reserved for teachers with scribal literacy. On the other side, however, certain synoptic texts demonstrate that Jesus' status as a synagogue teacher was neither prominent nor officially sanctioned (cf. Mk 6:2-3 // Mt 13:55), which is consistent with Jesus' belonging rather to the manual-laborer class of synagogue attendees. Keith's other novel offering in this chapter lies in noting and discussing the fact that, in narrating Jesus' return to his hometown synagogue (Mark 6:1-6 // Matthew 13:54-58 // Luke 4:16-30), Mark

and Matthew disagree with Luke as to whether Jesus was a scribal-literate teacher. According to Luke, Jesus evidently already belongs to the scribal-literate class, whereas Mark and Matthew elevate him from the manual-labor (scribal-illiterate) class to the position of a scribal-literate teacher, despite the fact that he is a τέκτων (Mk) or the son of one (Mt). Thus, according to Keith, the synoptic Gospels attest that early Christians remembered Jesus in two contradictory ways, namely as both a scribal-literate teacher (Luke) and a scribal-illiterate teacher (Mk // Mt). It means that Jesus' scribal-literate status was a debated issue in the first century. The dichotomy is also attested by the late second-century *Infancy Gospel of Thomas,* where "Jesus was an unlettered son of a carpenter *and* knew the alphabet and could out-teach his scribal-educated teachers" (p. 164). The Gospel of John 7:15, in Keith's original interpretation, also seems to corroborate this conclusion, a text suggesting that "Jesus was the type of teacher who was able to confuse his audience concerning his scribal-literate status" (p. 150). The chapter ends with the presentation of the relevant early Christian documents – beginning already with the *Pericope Adulterae* and the Apocalypse and ending with the testimonies from the sixth century – which depict Jesus as the scribal-literate author of texts (letters and the gospel), either through dictation (Rev 1–3; *Gospel of Thomas*) or by his own hand (the *Pericope Adulterae*; a letter to King Abgar; the *Narrative of Joseph of Arimathea*; an *Epistle of Christ* possessed by the Manichaeans; Adamantius in *Dialogue on the True Faith in God*, who states that Marcionites claimed that Jesus wrote the gospel; and Aphrahat in *Demonstrations*, which also includes the claim that Jesus authored the gospel tradition).

In his final chapter, Keith expounds upon his main thesis, arguing that "Jesus most likely was not a scribal-literate teacher, but many of his audiences likely thought he was" (p. 5) – or, to be more precise, "Jesus' own life and ministry produced conflicting convictions about his scribal-literate status" (p. 165). In the author's understanding, his thesis offers "the most plausible explanation for why early Christians remembered Jesus as a scribal-illiterate teacher, a scribal-literate teacher, and as someone who confused his audiences on the issue" (p. 165). Returning to methodology, in constructing his thesis Keith does not abandon the socio-historical approach entirely, but gives it a more nuanced and appropriate place in his reasoning. The socio-historical context is informative for the scholar in evaluating his or her proposal, but it cannot be determinative, since applying historical generalities to a singular case is always problematic and never yields 100% certainty. In fact, until now, for scholars discussing the issue of Jesus' literacy, the socio-historical context was always central and determinative in extracting their conclusions,

that is: if the vast majority of Jesus' compatriots in the late Second Temple Galilee were illiterate, then Jesus had to be illiterate too. Now, in Keith's social-memory approach, he resorts to the sources which contain contradictory and confusing claims about Jesus' literacy. Then, drawing upon the socio-historical approach, the claim of scribal illiteracy seems far more likely than that of scribal literacy. Consequently, "the lack of any convincing evidence for a popular-level educational system in Palestine (and the rest of the ancient world) and concomitant severely limited literacy rates place the burden of proof upon scholars who would argue that, unlike around 90 percent of Galileans, Jesus did receive a scribal-literate education" (p. 169). Moreover, the assumption that Jesus was illiterate better explains the conflicting memories about Jesus' literacy. Using the criterion of embarrassment, Keith also concludes that a tradition remembering a scribal-illiterate Jesus is much more likely than a scribal-literate one to explain the apparent embarrassment of early Christians. Further, in this chapter Keith argues that the conflicting memories regarding Jesus' scribal-literary status stem directly from the life and ministry of Jesus and are not a product of early Christian theologians like Luke. For instance, Jesus' teaching in a synagogue service, his challenging or referencing the teachings of scribes, engaging in debate with scribal-literate authorities, his citing Scripture (and accusing his opponents of *not* knowing Scripture) during such a debate, and interpreting Torah to the crowds – all invited Jesus' audiences to ponder and scrutinize his status as a scribal-literate authority. Moreover, the conclusion those audiences reached about Jesus' scribal literacy was all the easier since, in the public battles of wits between Jesus and his learned opponents, Jesus always won. Keith also notes that Jesus' audiences were decidedly mixed, consisting of both scribal-literate individuals (e.g. Pharisees, chief priests, etc.) and scribal-illiterate persons, the latter certainly the majority among the multitudes gathering around him. Consequently, different people among Jesus' audiences could have gained different perceptions of Jesus' scribal-literate status. To use Keith's words: "A completely illiterate farmer in Jerusalem for a festival and a scribe from the temple could have witnessed the exact same interpretive battle between Jesus and Pharisees and walked away with opposite convictions about Jesus" (p. 180). Those contradictory Jesus-memories concerning his scribal status, attested already among Jesus' eyewitnesses, were then passed on to the next generation of Christians and, as such, are reflected in the NT: Mark presents an illiterate Jesus, Luke a literate one. Obviously, as Keith rightly notes, not all early Christians were necessarily confused over the issue. Some of them, as the gospels of Matthew and John attest, did not pay much attention to this problem and could even consciously allow the conflicting perceptions.

In the foreword to the book, Dale C. Allison, Jr., rightly deems Keith's work "comprehensive, well-informed, and well-argued" (p. IX). In Allison's opinion, the book reboots the discussion on the issue of Jesus' literacy and "renders everything else written on this subject well-night irrelevant" (p. X). Indeed, Keith's volume ably summarizes previous work on Jesus' literacy and goes on to provide its own original contributions. Keith strongly argues that the question of Jesus' literacy is a foundational issue for historical Jesus research, as it bears directly on our interpretation of the controversy narratives in the gospels. Keith's unique impact on these discussions lies in stressing the various gradations of literacy within Second Temple Judaism, and also in abandoning the simplistic literacy/illiteracy dichotomy upon which all previous studies have been based. In passing, we must acknowledge that a gradation of literacy skills was noted by a few scholars prior to Keith's work (J.P. Meier 1991; P.J.J. Botha 2005). Keith's originality in dealing with Jesus' literacy, however, lies also in his adopting the Jesus-memory approach, instead of the most commonly employed criteria approach. Keith's answer to the title problem is aptly balanced: "Although I propose that Jesus likely did not hold scribal literacy, I also propose that if one were able to ask Jesus' contemporaries whether he was a scribal-literate teacher, the answer one received would depend upon which contemporary of Jesus one asked" (p. 190). Finally, Keith makes a vital contribution by demonstrating that already the first century textual sources, i.e. the canonical gospels, followed by other works of early Christianity – all reflect the divergent assessments of Jesus' scribal-literate status. To sum up, Keith's work presents the most innovative approach to the question of Jesus' literacy to date. *Jesus' Literacy* is well-researched and its arguments are persuasive, moving forward significantly the scholarly discussion of Jesus' scribal-literate status. It is highly recommended, if not indispensable, for New Testament scholars and theologians involved in research on the historical Jesus.