

Jewish Scripture and the Literacy of Jesus

Craig A. Evans

In a recent publication Pieter Botha restates an argument that has been heard before: that Jesus in all probability could not read.¹ A few months later an essay by Paul Foster appeared, in which the opposite conclusion was reached.² Both scholars agree that it is not really possible to settle the issue with any degree of certainty. As in much of scholarship concerned with antiquity, conclusions are largely decisions based on probability. So it is with regard to the question of Jesus' literacy. In my opinion, Foster's conclusion is the more compelling of the two. His assessment of the contextual issues is more nuanced and rightly recognizes that what may obtain in the case of the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity probably does not obtain for Torah-observant Jewry. However, there are some important factors that should be taken into further consideration.

Three passages in the Gospels suggest Jesus was able to read. The first passage is Luke 4:16-30, which describes Jesus reading from the scroll of Isaiah and then preaching a homily. Most scholars hesitate to draw firm conclusions from this passage because of its relationship to the parallel passage in Mark 6:1-6, which says nothing about reading Scripture. The second passage is John 8:6, which says Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. The problem here is that in all probability this passage (viz. John 7:53-8:11) is inauthentic.³ Even if the passage is accepted as

¹See P. F. Craffert and P. J. J. Botha, "Why Jesus Could Walk on the Sea but He Could Not Read and Write," *Neot* 39 (2005): 5-35. Botha argues for the illiteracy of Jesus in the fourth part of this paper, under the heading "Was Jesus Literate?" (pp. 21-32). It is to this part of the paper that reference will be made.

²Paul Foster, "Educating Jesus: The Search for a Plausible Context," *JSHJ* 4 (2006): 7-33. Foster's study is not in response to Botha.

³It is either omitted or marked off with asterisks or obeli in the earliest mss (omitted in $\mathfrak{P}^{66,75}$ \aleph A^{vid} B C^{vid} L N T W X Y Δ Θ Ψ 33 and many others; marked with asterisks or obeli in E S Λ Π 1077 1424 1443 1445). In other mss it appears elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel (after 7:36, 225; after 7:44, several Georgian mss; after 21:25, 565 1076 1570 1582 several Armenian mss), and in some mss it appears in Luke (after 21:38, f^{13} ; after 24:53, 1333). See the discussion in Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London and New

preserving a genuine reminiscence of something Jesus did, it tells us nothing certain about Jesus' literacy. He may have been doing nothing more than doodling.⁴

The third passage, John 7:15, directly speaks to the question of Jesus' literacy, at least in the narrative world of the fourth evangelist. Some in Jerusalem wonder: "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" Literally, they have asked how he "knows letters" (γράμματα οἶδεν), "not having studied" or "not having learned" (μὴ μεμαθηκώς). But the reference here is to a lack of formal, scribal training, not to having had no education whatsoever. Jesus has not sat at the feet of a trained, recognized rabbi or sage.⁵ We encounter the same language in Acts, which describes the reaction of the religious authorities to the disciples of Jesus: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated [ἀγράμματοι], common men [ἰδιῶται], they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). The words ἀγράμματοι and ἰδιῶται should not be rendered "unlearned and ignorant," as in the King James Version (and ASV). To be ἀγράμματος is to lack scribal training (so LSJ), and is in fact the opposite of the γραμματεὺς, the professional "scribe."⁶ To be ἀγράμματος does not necessarily mean to be unable to read.

To be an ἰδιώτης is to be one outside of the guild, or outside of the group, as in 1 Cor 14:16, 23, and 24, where Paul refers to the "outsider" (so RSV) or "ungifted" (so NASB) as an ἰδιώτης. In contrast to professional trained scribes and priests the ἰδιώτης is a layman.⁷ In 2 Cor 11:6 Paul says of himself, "Even if I am unskilled [ἰδιώτης] in speaking . . ." (RSV). Paul, of course, could and did preach, and did so effectively. Yet he conceded

York: United Bible Societies, 1971) 219-22. The pericope is clearly an intrusion in its present context. Moreover, it contains several non-Johannine words and phrases. "The evidence for the non-Johannine origin of this pericope of the adulteress," Metzger rightly remarks, "is overwhelming" (219). See also the comments in L. M. McDonald and S. E. Porter, *Early Christianity and Its Sacred Literature* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2000) 578, 587, 625.

⁴The evidence is very helpfully reviewed in Foster, "Educating Jesus," 19-21.

⁵See again the helpful review of the options and the scholarly opinion in Foster, "Educating Jesus," 17-19.

⁶C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994-1998) 2:233-34.

⁷According to LSJ an ἰδιώτης is a common or private person, one who lacks professional training and education.

that he lacked formal training in rhetoric and oratory. Hence he regarded himself as “unskilled” or outside the guild. ἰδιώτης may also refer to a commoner, in contrast to royalty.⁸ The ἰδιώτης is the unskilled (with reference to any profession or trade) or commoner (in contrast to a ruler) and seems to be the equivalent of the Hebrew *hediyot*, as seen in *m. Mo‘ed Qatan* 1:8 (“He that is not skilled [*hahediyot*] may sew after his usual fashion, but the craftsman may make only irregular stitches”) and *m. Sanh.* 10:2 (“Three kings and four commoners [*hediyototh*] have no share in the world to come . . .”).

The comments in John 7:15 and Acts 4:13 should not be taken to imply that Jesus and his disciples were illiterate. In fact, the opposite is probably the intended sense, as most commentators rightly interpret. That is, despite not having had formal training, Jesus and his disciples evince remarkable skill in the knowledge of Scripture and ability to interpret it and defend their views. These texts, more than Luke 4:16-30 and John 8:6, lend some support to the probability that Jesus was literate.⁹

One might also mention the *titulus* placed on or near Jesus’ cross (cf. Mark 15:26; Matt 27:37; Luke 23:37). Its placement surely implies that some people observing Jesus could read, among them perhaps his own disciples (for whom the *titulus* serves as a warning, in keeping with Roman policy of public execution as a deterrence). According to the fourth Gospel: “Many of the Jews read [πολλοὶ ἀνέγνωσαν τῶν Ἰουδαίων] this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek” (John 19:20). It is interesting to note that

⁸Cf. LXX Prov 6:8: “the labors of which both kings and subjects [ἰδιῶται] apply themselves.” According to Josephus, Moses says to God: “I am at a loss to know how I, a mere commoner [ἰδιώτης] blest with no strength, could either find words to persuade my people . . . or constrain Pharaoh” (*Ant.* 2.12.2 §271). This nuance is also noted in LSJ.

⁹Even if one takes the position that the narrative of John 7 does not derive from the *Sitz im Leben* of Jesus, but reflects the later *Sitz* of the Johannine community, it may well reflect an accurate memory of Jesus and his earliest followers, viz., that though lacking formal training, they could discuss the Scriptures. For review of more legendary materials, such as Mary’s relationship to Elizabeth and Zechariah (Luke 1:5-36), which could suggest exposure to more educated circles, or Jesus as a boy in the temple dialoguing with the teachers (Luke 2:40-52), or Jesus as a schoolboy in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, see Foster, “Educating Jesus,” 15-17, 22-25. None of this tradition has probative value.

the evangelist could assume that “many” Judeans were able to read the *titulus*.

Although there is no unambiguous evidence for the literacy of Jesus,¹⁰ there is considerable contextual and circumstantial evidence that suggests that in all probability he was literate. At the outset, we should keep in mind the nature of Jewish faith itself. It is centered on Scripture, which narrates Israel’s sacred story, a story that the Jewish people are admonished to know and to teach their children. According to the Shema’, which all Torah-observant Jews were expected to recite daily, parents were to teach their children Torah (cf. Deut 4:9; 6:7; 11:19; 31:12-13; 2 Chr 17:7-9; Eccl 12:9), even to adorn their doorposts with the Shema’ (Deut 6:9 “you shall write [*ketavka/γράψετε*] them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates”; cf. 11:20).¹¹ One should suppose that scriptural commandments such as these, which stand at the heart of Jewish faith (cf. Mark 12:28-33; James 2:19), would have encouraged literacy among the Jewish people.¹²

According to Philo and Josephus, approximate contemporaries of Jesus, Jewish parents taught their children Torah and how to read it. Philo claims: “All men guard their own customs, but this is especially true of the Jewish nation. Holding that the laws are oracles vouchsafed by God and having been trained in this doctrine from their earliest years [*τοῦτο ἐκ πρώτης ἡλικίας τὸ μάθημα παιδευθέντες*], they carry the likenesses of the commandments enshrined in their souls” (*De Legatione* 31 §210). It is improbable that the training of which he speaks here did not include basic literacy. Josephus, however, is more explicit: “Above all we pride ourselves on the education of our children [*παιδοτροφίαν*], and regard as the most essential task in life the observance of our laws and of the pious practices, based thereupon, which we have inherited” (*Ag. Ap.* 1.12 §60). He says later: “(The Law) orders that (children) shall be taught to read [*γράμματα παιδεύειν*], and shall learn both the laws and the deeds of their forefathers

¹⁰As rightly remarked by J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 277: “individual texts from the Gospels prove very little about the literacy of Jesus.”

¹¹Consistent with this expectation, the author of the *Testament of Levi* has the great patriarch admonish his sons: “Teach your children letters [*γράμματα*] also, so that they might have understanding throughout all their lives as they ceaselessly read [*ἀναγινώσκοντες ἀδιαλείπτως*] the Law of God” (*T. Levi* 13:2).

¹²Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 275.

...” (*Ag. Ap.* 2.25 §204). The claim that the Law “orders” children to be taught to read derives from Deut 6:9 and 11:20 (cited above). Josephus goes so far as to say that “most men, so far from living in accordance with their own laws, hardly know what they are. . . . But, should anyone of our nation be questioned about the laws, he would repeat them all more readily than his own name. The result, then, of our thorough grounding in the laws from the first dawn of intelligence is that we have them, as it were, engraved on our souls” (*Ag. Ap.* 2.18 §176, §178). This may not be too wide of the truth, for Augustine claims that Seneca made a similar remark: “The Jews, however, are aware of the origin and meaning of their rites. The greater part of (other) people go through a ritual not knowing why they do so” (*De Civitate Dei* 6.11).¹³

It may be admitted that Philo and Josephus are painting idealistic pictures and perhaps have in mind affluent families that can afford the luxury of formal education for their children. But it would be a mistake to assume that the pursuit of education, including above all literacy, was limited to the upper class or to professionals. In the story of the seven martyred sons (cf. 2 Maccabees 7) we have no reason to imagine an upper class family. In the version presented in 4 Maccabees the mother reminds her sons of their father’s teaching:

He, while he was still with you, taught [ἐδίδασκειν] you the Law and the Prophets. He read [ἀνεγίνωσκέν] to you of Abel, slain by Cain, of Isaac, offered as a burnt offering, and of Joseph, in prison. He spoke to you of the zeal of Phineas, taught [ἐδίδασκειν] you about Hananiah . . . He reminded you of the scripture of Isaiah which says . . . [Isa 43:2] . . . He sang to you the psalm of David which says . . . [Ps 34:19] . . . He recited the proverb of Solomon which says . . . [Prov 3:18] . . . He affirmed the word of Ezekiel [Ezek 37:3] . . . Nor did he forget the song that Moses taught which says . . . [Deut 32:39]. (4 Macc 18:10-19)

The summary here of the father’s instruction of his sons clearly presupposes literacy. The portrait is idealized to be sure, but for it to have any persuasive value in Jewish society, it would have to be realistic.

Popular piety expressed in the earliest rabbinic tradition coheres with the testimonies of Philo and Josephus. The sages enjoin, “provide yourself a teacher” (*’Abot* 1:16; cf. 1:6). In the saying attributed to Judah ben Tema, literacy is assumed to be the norm: “At five years old [one is fit] for the

¹³It is possible of course that Augustine’s reference is to Josephus and not to Seneca.

Scripture, at ten for the Mishnah, at thirteen for [keeping] the commandments (i.e., *bar mitzvah*) . . .” (*’Abot* 5:21; cf. *b. Ketub.* 50a: “Do not accept a pupil under the age of six; but accept one from the age of six and stuff him [with knowledge] like an ox”). Elsewhere in the Mishnah we read that “children . . . should be educated . . . so that they will be familiar with the commandments” (*m. Yoma* 8:4). We find a similar injunction in the Tannaitic midrash on Deuteronomy: “Once an infant begins to talk, his father should converse with him in the holy tongue and should teach him Torah, for if he fails to do so it is the same as if he had buried him” (*Sipre Deut.* §56 [on Deut 11:19]; cf. *t. Qidd.* 1.11: “What is the father’s duty towards his son? . . . to teach him Torah”).¹⁴ If a son lacks the intelligence to ask his father the proper questions concerning the meaning of Passover, his father is to instruct him (*m. Pesah.* 10:4). There is halakhic discussion that clearly presupposes that children can read Scripture (cf. *m. Meg.* 4:5-6; *t. Sab.* 11.17: “If a minor holds the pen . . . ,” *Soperim* 5.9: regulations concerning producing extracts of Scripture for children). One of the first things a new proselyte is to learn is the Hebrew alphabet, forwards and backwards (*b. Sab.* 31a, in reference to Hillel). The rabbinic tradition contains numerous references to schools, to the effect that every synagogue and village had at least one school.¹⁵ The idealistic and tendentious nature

¹⁴See also *’Abot R. Nat.* 6.2: “Rabbi Aqiba took hold of one end of the tablet and his son the other end of the tablet. The teacher wrote down *aleph beth* for him and he learned it; *aleph tav*, and he learned it; the book of Leviticus, and he learned it. He went on studying until he learned the whole Torah.” *Gen. Rab.* 63.10 (on Gen 25:27): “Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Simeon said: ‘A man is responsible for his son until age thirteen.’” Whatever the probative value of this tradition, the training envisioned here is probably for would-be sages and rabbis, not necessarily for the average person.

¹⁵According to *b. B. Bat.* 21a, on the organization of public schools: “At length Joshua ben Gamala came and ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town and that children begin their schooling at the age of six or seven.” There are many texts that say similar things (e.g., *b. Sanh.* 17b; *y. Meg.* 3.1 [73d]; *y. Ketub.* 13.1 [35c] = *b. Gitt.* 58a; *y. Hag.* 1.7; *b. Sab.* 119b; *y. Ketub.* 8.11 [32c]). Other traditions presuppose the education of children in literacy (e.g., *b. Hag.* 15a-b; *b. Hull.* 95b; *b. Gitt.* 56a; *Song Rab.* 2:5 §3). Some have argued that the discovery of abecedaries point to the existence of schools; e.g., A. R. Millard, “‘BGD—Magic Spell or Educational Exercise?’” *Eretz-Israel* 18 (1985) 39-42. Abecedaries point to literacy, not to schools. For a discussion of this issue, though in reference to earlier periods in Israel’s history, see M. Haran, “On

of this material is often not adequately appreciated.¹⁶ Primarily on the basis of the rabbinic tradition, Shemuel Safrai concludes that “the ability to write was fairly widespread . . . [but] less widespread than that of reading which everyone possessed.”¹⁷ Notwithstanding his uncritical use of rabbinical sources,¹⁸ Safrai’s conclusion that literacy was widespread among Jews may be more correct than not.

Recognizing the limited value of the late, idealized rabbinic literature and the apologetically orientated claims of Philo and Josephus, three general factors favor the probability of the literacy of Jesus: (1) the injunctions of Scripture to teach and learn Torah, (2) the value placed on Torah, of knowing and obeying its laws, and (3) the advantage of being the firstborn son. In view of these factors, it is probable that Jesus received at least some education in literacy. The probability increases when we take into account features of his later ministry. In these features we have, I believe, far more compelling evidence for the literacy of Jesus.

the Diffusion of Schools and Literacy,” in J. A. Emerton, ed., *Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986*, VTSup 40 (Leiden: Brill, 1988) 81-95. J. T. Townsend (“Ancient Education in the Time of the Early Roman Empire,” in S. Benko and J. J. O’Rourke, eds., *The Catacombs and the Colosseum* [Valley Forge PA: Judson Press, 1971] 139-63) cautiously concludes that Jewish schools in any number did not emerge until after the Bar Kokhba war. On the whole, however, there is significant evidence for literacy in ancient Israel and in Israel of late antiquity; cf. A. R. Millard, “An Assessment of the Evidence for Writing in Ancient Israel,” in A. Biran, ed., *Biblical Archaeology Today* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985) 301-12.

¹⁶As seen, e.g., in S. Safrai, “Education and the Study of Torah,” in S. Safrai and M. Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century*, 2 vols., CRINT 1.1-2 (Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974, 1976) 2:945-70; E. Schürer *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols., rev. by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–1987) 2:415-20; J. T. Townsend, “Education (Greco-Roman),” in *ABD* 2:312-17, esp. 315-17.

¹⁷Safrai, “Education and the Study of Torah,” 952. Safrai remarks further (953-55), depending on *y. Meg.* 3.1 (73d); cf. *y. Ketub.* 13.1 (35c), that schools were connected with synagogues and that learning Torah was obligatory for boys but not for girls. But do these traditions really tell us anything about Jewish literacy in the first century?

¹⁸Uncritical acceptance of the rabbinic tradition of schools in every village is rightly criticized in Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 271, and Botha, “Was Jesus Literate?” 24-25.

Jesus is frequently called “Rabbi”¹⁹ or “Rabbo(u)ni,”²⁰ or its Greek equivalents “master” (ἐπιστάτα)²¹ or “teacher” (διδάσκαλος).²² Jesus refers to himself in this manner, and is called such by supporters, opponents, and nonpartisans. Although prior to 70 CE the designation “Rabbi” is informal, even vague, and lacks the later connotations of formal training and ordination, which obtain sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, it is very probable that at least a limited literacy was assumed.

In keeping with his designation as Rabbi, Jesus and others called his closest followers “disciples,” whose Greek form (μαθηταί),²³ like the Hebrew (*talmidim*),²⁴ derives from the verbal cognate “to learn” (μανθάνειν/*lamad*).²⁵ This terminology, whose appearance in the Gospels betrays no hint that it was controversial or in any sense a matter of debate, or the product of early Christian tendentiousness, creates a strong presumption in favor of Jesus’ literacy. In the Jewish setting, an *illiterate* Rabbi, who surrounds himself with disciples, debates Scripture and halakah with other Rabbis and scribes, is hardly credible. Moreover, the numerous parallels between Jesus’ teaching and the rabbinic tradition, as well as the many points of agreement between Jesus’ interpretation of Scripture and the rabbinic tradition,²⁶ only add to this conviction. Jesus’ teaching in the synagogues²⁷ is not easily explained if Jesus were unable to read and had not undertaken study of Scripture that involved at least some training in literacy.

¹⁹Mark 9:5; 1:21; 14:45; etc.

²⁰Mark 10:51; John 20:16.

²¹Luke 5:5; 8:24, 45; 9:33, 49; 17:13.

²²Matt 8:19; 9:11; 12:38; Mark 4:38; 5:35; 9:17; 10:17, 20; 12:14, 19, 32; Luke 19:39; John 1:38; 3:2.

²³Mark 2:15, 16, 18, 23; 3:7, 9; 4:34; 5:31; and Q: Luke 6:20; 10:23; 12:22; 14:26, 27.

²⁴*Abot* 1:1, 11; 2:8; 5:12; 6:6.

²⁵“This, in turn, is education in the law [ἡ τοῦ νόμου παιδεία], by which we learn [μανθάνομεν] divine matters reverently and human affairs to our advantage” (4 Macc 1:17 RSV).

²⁶R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, WUNT 2/7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981); B. D. Chilton and C. A. Evans, “Jesus and Israel’s Scriptures,” in B. D. Chilton and C. A. Evans, eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, NTTS 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 281-335, here 285-98.

²⁷Matt 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:15; 6:6; 13:10; John 6:59. Botha’s interesting suggestion concerning this point will be discussed shortly.

In the style of the sages and rabbis of his day, Jesus “sat down” when he taught (cf. the discussion of when to sit or stand; *b. Meg.* 21a).²⁸ Moreover, Jesus’ contemporaries compared him with scribes, that is, with literate people: “And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). Although such comparison in itself does not prove that Jesus was literate, it supports the Gospels’ portrait that Jesus was a Rabbi or teacher, which in turn should require a presumption in favor of literacy. It is difficult to imagine Jesus enjoying a favorable comparison with rival scribes, if—unlike them—he was illiterate.

On occasion Jesus himself refers to reading Scripture. He asks Pharisees who criticized his disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath: “Have you never read [ἀνέγνωτε] what David did, when he was in need and was hungry . . . ?” (Mark 2:25; cf. Matt 12:3). To this pericope Matthew adds: “Or have you not read in the law [ἀνέγνωτε ἐν τῷ νόμῳ] how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless?” (Matt 12:5; cf. 19:4, where Matthew again enriches the Markan source in a similar manner; the same is probably the case in Matt 21:16). In another polemical context, Jesus asks the ruling priests and elders: “Have you not read this scripture [οὐδὲ τὴν γραφὴν ταύτην ἀνέγνωτε]: ‘The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner . . . ?’” (Mark 12:10). Later he asks the Sadducees, who had raised a question about resurrection: “And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses [οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε ἐν τῇ βίβλῳ Μωϋσέως], in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?” (Mark 12:26). In a discussion with a legal expert (νομικός τις), who has asked what one must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus asks in turn: “What is written in the Law? How do you read? [ἐν τῷ νόμῳ τί γέγραπται; πῶς ἀναγινώσκεις;]” (Luke 10:26).²⁹ We find in the rabbinic literature statements like “Similarly you read” (e.g., *b. Sab.* 97a; *Ketub.* 111a, 111b) or “How would you read this verse?” (e.g., *Ketub.* 81b;

²⁸Matt 5:1; 26:55; Mark 12:41; Luke 4:20; 5:3; cf. Matt 23:2, where Jesus refers to the scribes and Pharisees who sit on the seat of Moses (ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας).

²⁹J. A. T. Robinson (“Did Jesus have a Distinctive Use of Scripture?” in *Twelve More New Testament Studies* [London: SCM Press, 1984] 35-43) has called this distinctive feature Jesus’ “challenging use” of Scripture. Robinson rightly regards this feature as deriving from Jesus himself and not the early Christian community.

Qid. 22a, 40a, 81b). But Jesus' rhetorical and pointed "have you not read?" seems to be distinctive of his style and surely would have little argumentative force if he himself could not read.³⁰ And finally, even if we discount Luke 4:16-30 as the evangelist's retelling of Mark 6:1-6, it may nevertheless accurately recall Jesus' habit of reading and expounding Scripture in the synagogues of Galilee: "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, *as his custom was*, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read [ἀνέστη ἀναγνῶναι] . . ." (Luke 4:16, emphasis added). I shall return to this passage below.

It should be noted too that in the Gospel stories reviewed above Jesus' literacy is never an issue. There is no evidence of apologetic tendencies, in which Jesus' literary skills are exaggerated. Jesus' ability to read appears to be a given, but not an issue.³¹

Indications of Jesus' literacy may also be seen in his familiarity with and usage of Scripture. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus quotes or alludes to 23 of the 36 books of the Hebrew Bible³² (counting the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles as three books, not six). Jesus alludes to or quotes all five books of Moses, the three Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), eight of the twelve Minor Prophets,³³ and five of the "writings."³⁴ In other words, Jesus quotes or alludes to *all* of the books of the Law, *most* of the Prophets, and *some* of the Writings. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus quotes or alludes to Deuteronomy some 15 or 16 times, Isaiah some 40 times, and the Psalms some 13 times. These appear to be his favorite books, though Daniel and Zechariah seem to have been favorites also. Superficially, then, the "canon" of Jesus is pretty much what it was for most religiously observant Jews of his time,³⁵ including—and

³⁰So rightly J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making 1 (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 314.

³¹This important point is made by Foster, "Educating Jesus," 32.

³²See the helpful tabulation in R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (London: Tyndale, 1971) 259-63.

³³Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, and Malachi. Omitted are Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Haggai.

³⁴Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Daniel, and Chronicles. Omitted are Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

³⁵C. A. Evans, "The Scriptures of Jesus and His Earliest Followers," in L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 185-95.

especially—the producers of the scrolls at Qumran.³⁶ Moreover, there is evidence that villages and synagogues in the time of Jesus did in fact possess biblical scrolls (cf. 1 Macc 1:56-57; Josephus, *War* 2.12.2 §229 [in reference to Antiochus IV's efforts to find and destroy Torah scrolls]; *Life* 134 [in reference to scrolls in Galilee, during the early stages of the revolt against Rome]).

Finally, the frequency and poignancy of Jesus' employment of Aramaic tradition in his allusions and interpretations of Scripture are suggestive of literacy, regular participation in the synagogue (where the Aramaic paraphrase, or Targum, developed), and acquaintance with rabbinic and scribal education itself.³⁷ The dictional, thematic, and exegetical coherence between the teachings of Jesus and the emerging Aramaic tradition has been well documented and need not be rehearsed here.³⁸

The data that have been surveyed are more easily explained in reference to a literate Jesus, a Jesus who could read the Hebrew Scriptures, could paraphrase and interpret them in Aramaic, and could do so in a manner that indicated his familiarity with current interpretive tendencies in both popular circles (as in the synagogues) and in professional, even elite circles (as seen in debates with scribes, ruling priests, and elders). Of course, to conclude that Jesus was literate is not necessarily to conclude that Jesus had received formal scribal training. The data do not suggest this. Jesus' innovative, experiential approach to Scripture and to Jewish faith seems to suggest the contrary.

In view of the data reviewed above and what strikes me as the most logical inference from it—namely, that Jesus was literate to some degree—why does Professor Botha reach a very different conclusion? He

³⁶In the nonbiblical scrolls of Qumran and the region of the Dead Sea (here the *pesharim* are being excluded) the book of Deuteronomy is quoted some 22 times, Isaiah some 35 times, and the Psalter some 31 times. See J. C. VanderKam, "Authoritative Literature in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 5 (1998): 382-402; idem, "Question of Canon Viewed through the Dead Sea Scrolls," in McDonald and Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate*, 91-109.

³⁷One is reminded of the rabbinic dictum: "Scripture leads to Targum, Targum leads to Mishnah, Mishnah leads to Talmud, Talmud leads to performance" (*Sipre Deut.* §161; on Deut 17:19). Although this dictum postdates Jesus by centuries, it probably in part mirrors earlier concepts of scribal pedagogy.

³⁸See B. D. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible: Jesus' Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time*, GNS 8 (Wilmington DE: Glazier, 1984); Chilton and Evans, "Jesus and Israel's Scriptures," 299-309.

is not alone, for other scholars have expressed doubts that Jesus could read.³⁹ Their doubts may owe in part to William Harris, whose influential study in literacy in antiquity concludes that probably not more than five percent of the population was functionally literate.⁴⁰ In short, “it seems unlikely that a person from rural and peasant background of Jesus of Nazareth would have learnt to read or write.”⁴¹ Botha has invoked a cultural argument, in contrast to the literary and traditional arguments set forth above. Let us review his argument briefly.

Botha begins with literacy in antiquity. He rightly complains about scholarly conclusions that do not sufficiently recognize the paucity and ambiguity of the evidence for literacy in the Mediterranean world of late antiquity: “In general, references to literacy in antiquity reflect fairly unrealistic understandings of literacy.”⁴² On this point I think he is mostly correct. Botha also rightly questions some of the inferences made from ostraca and inscriptions.⁴³ His most forceful argument revolves around a description of “Jesus’ peasant world.”⁴⁴ In this world the expense of education would have been viewed as an extravagant, unnecessary risk. Better to spend time in the field or the shop than in study, from which there would be little economic gain.

Botha offers another, very creative argument, in which he delineates several forms of literacy and their roles within the peasant culture of

³⁹R. W. Funk and R. W. Hoover, eds., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (Sonoma CA: Polebridge Press; New York: Macmillan, 1993) 27; J. D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) 25-26; R. W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 158.

⁴⁰W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴¹Botha, “Was Jesus Literate?” 32.

⁴²Botha, “Was Jesus Literate?” 22. Here Botha especially has in mind the conclusions reached in uncritical appeals to Josephus and rabbinic literature.

⁴³Botha, “Was Jesus Literate?” 23-24. In my view, Botha’s position at this point struggles against the discovery of great quantities of papyri, many of which were written by untrained hands, that is, by persons who obviously could read, but just as obviously were not trained scribes. The thousands of nonprofessional papyri, along with the thousands of ostraca, on which are written receipts, brief lists of goods, names, and the like, may well be important evidence of literacy among larger numbers of people in the Mediterranean than Harris and Botha have allowed.

⁴⁴Botha, “Was Jesus Literate?” 25-26.

Galilee, in which Jesus “performs” a “reading.”⁴⁵ “The historical Jesus could not read or write,” Botha explains, but he may well have made use of a scroll in performing what could be described as a “magical reading.”⁴⁶ Accordingly, the account in Luke 4:16-30, in which Jesus is said to have read from the scroll of Isaiah, may reflect an actual episode. Jesus takes the scroll, unrolls it, paraphrases a passage (though not actually located and read), rolls it up, hands it back to the attendant, and then proclaims his message. The scroll plays an important role in Jesus’ dramatic performance, but really provides no evidence that Jesus was literate in the sense that he could read and write. As a Galilean peasant, Botha explains, Jesus “was at best able to recognize a few letters (meaning numbers) and construe a few names and/or inscriptional signs.”⁴⁷

Botha’s proposal of a dramatic performance, perhaps even a “magical reading,” is an intriguing suggestion. It is consistent with Jesus as healer and exorcist. It is consistent with his experiential use of Scripture and could also explain his dynamic paraphrasing of Scripture.

Nevertheless, I find an illiterate Jesus harder to explain, in the light of the Gospel tradition. Jesus was regarded as a teacher—by friend and foe alike. He argued points of Scripture with scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and ruling priests. He specifically challenged their readings of Scripture. He taught disciples—“learners”—who in turn preserved his teaching. The movement that Jesus founded produced a legacy of literature, including four Gospels, a narrative of the early Church (i.e., the book of Acts), and a number of letters. The sudden emergence of a prolific literary tradition from an illiterate founder is not impossible of course, but it is less difficult to explain if Jesus were in fact literate.

I also find aspects of Botha’s cultural argument unpersuasive. The conclusions reached by Harris, on which evidently Crossan and others rely, may be accurate with regard to the Mediterranean world in general, but do they apply to the Jewish people? Moreover, Botha makes assumptions about the typical Galilean—specifically that he is illiterate—and assumes that Jesus was no more than a typical Galilean peasant.⁴⁸ How does he know

⁴⁵Botha, “Was Jesus Literate?” 27-31.

⁴⁶As is also suggested by Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 158: “He could be compared to David and Solomon in the popular culture. . . . His rhetorical skills bordered on the magical—he was a word wizard.”

⁴⁷Botha, “Was Jesus Literate?” 31.

⁴⁸So do Crossan and Funk. According to Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary*

this? On the contrary, the status and following that Jesus achieved suggest that Jesus was not a typical Galilean. Botha is correct in challenging the specific application of generalities about literacy, but the same goes in applying generalities about Galileans to the specific person Jesus. He was regarded as unusual by many of his contemporaries, by both friend and foe.

In the end it is a question of probability, not proof. I agree with Foster, with his inferences from the sources. The decisive factors in the debate are not found in generalities touching the world of Jesus, but in specific and distinctive features found in Jesus himself.

I urge Botha and other like-minded scholars to take into account these specific features—a rabbi who instructs disciples, engages in theological and scriptural debate with religious authorities, frequents synagogues, appears to be familiar with certain parts of the Jewish scriptures, founded a movement that produced literature, not least a body of writings that comes to be called the New Testament.⁴⁹ In my judgment probability favors the conclusion that Jesus was literate, not of course in the professional or scribal sense, but in a functional sense. Jesus was no typical Galilean Jew, and, further, the Jews may not have been typical Mediterranean people, especially when it came to literacy.

Biography, 25, “it must be presumed that Jesus also was illiterate”; and according to Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 158, “He was also probably technically illiterate—he may not have been able to read and write.”

⁴⁹If I am correct here, then in a qualified sense we may say that the literacy of Jesus himself made an important contribution to the formation of the Christian biblical canon.