

QUESTION:

I don't know if you have covered this or not, but how about the issue of whether Jesus was literate or not? I came across a recent book on Amazon.com titled "Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee" by Chris Keith, and the topic sounds interesting.

RESPONSE:

Yes indeed, it's a very interesting - and much debated - issue. I have not yet read Chris Keith's book, but it's on my (very long) list. I do know what he argues (since I just asked him in an email): he thinks that Jesus was not trained in reading and writing, the way scribes in Palestine were; but it may be that lower class people who heard Jesus engage in serious discussion over the meaning of the Torah may well have *mistaken* him for someone who was. Scribes themselves would have looked on him as not up to their standards.

I'll have to read the book before passing judgment. But basically, it sounds like he and I are on the same page. Here let me tell you what I think and why.

I'll begin with something that I *have* talked about on the blog before: literacy in Roman Palestine. The reality is that the vast majority of people then and there could not read or write. This comes as a surprise to many people who have heard the modern myth that all boys in Palestine went to Hebrew school and became literate there. Turns out, that's not true.

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