

The Claim of John 7.15 and the Memory of Jesus' Literacy

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This article argues that John 7.15 claims neither literacy nor illiteracy for Jesus, but rather that Jesus was able to confuse his opponents with regards to his scribal literacy. According to the Johannine narrator, Jesus' opponents assumed he did not 'know letters', but also acknowledged that he taught as if he did. This article also suggests that the claim of John 7.15 is historically plausible in light of first-century Christianity's corporate memory(ies) of Jesus' literacy.

Keywords: John 7.15, literacy, historical Jesus, social memory

John 7.15 relates the following about Jesus' activities at the Festival of Tabernacles: 'About the middle of the festival Jesus went up to the temple and began to teach. The Jews were astonished at it, saying, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?"' (NRSV). This text, specifically where 'the Jews' question how Jesus γράμματα οἶδεν (literally, 'knows letters'; NRSV, 'have such learning'), is the only explicit first-century reference to Jesus' literate status. For this reason alone the passage deserves detailed attention, but its importance is heightened by the fact that Jesus' literacy plays an important (but under-appreciated) role in scholarly discussions of Jesus as a Jewish teacher. This article will outline previous interpretations of John 7.15, noting sources of confusion within the passage. Its primary contribution will be to elucidate what the text claims regarding Jesus' literacy, but it will also comment upon its historical authenticity in relation to the memory of Jesus. First, however, it is necessary to clarify why both this text and the question of Jesus' literacy are significant.

1. Why Does Jesus' Literacy Matter?

The question of Jesus' literacy matters because not all Second Temple Jewish teachers were created equal. More specifically, the dividing line between
44 recognized Torah authorities and unofficial teachers was one of education,

which led to mastery (whether presumed or actual) of the holy text rather than mere familiarity. In this context, then, literacy equaled power.¹ This is not to suggest that uneducated Torah teachers had no authority or were unable to resist the literate elite. As purveyors of local traditions and interpretations, they too could have served as Torah teachers and text-brokers.² It is, however, to observe that the locus of Torah authority resided with those teachers or groups of teachers who(m everyone knew) were most capable of accessing the text; that is, the most qualified text-brokers.³ In the words of Schwartz, 'Mastery of the Torah was a source of power and prestige'.⁴

Yet, the vast majority of the Jewish population in the Second Temple period was illiterate, and thus incapable of attaining such power and prestige. Harris's assertion of a general ten percent literacy rate for the Roman Empire is now well known.⁵ The most detailed assessment of the Jewish literate scene has furthered his research by suggesting that, if anything, illiteracy was even more common in Roman Palestine.⁶ Similarly, the most recent thorough studies of Jewish scribes, orality, textuality, and education have also affirmed Harris.⁷ In other words, the common anthropological description of Judaism in the time of Jesus as a world of 'haves and have-nots' applies as equally to education (and its benefits) as it does to wealth and food. In fact, there is an intrinsic connection between these matters, since a full education was generally attainable only by those wealthy enough to have leisure time in which they could pursue such an

- 1 On this topic, see especially M. D. Goodman, 'Texts, Scribes and Power in Roman Judaea', *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (ed. Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994) 99-108, as well as Robin Lane Fox, 'Literacy and Power in Early Christianity', in the same volume, 126-48.
- 2 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (3 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 1.268: 'But in an oral culture, one could theoretically be an effective teacher, especially of ordinary peasants, without engaging in reading or writing'. Cf. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003) 1.712 n.86.
- 3 More broadly on the power of literates in illiterate cultures with a holy text, see the well-known study of Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1983).
- 4 Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (JCM; Princeton: Princeton University, 2001) 74 (emphasis added).
- 5 William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1989) 22. Further, '[It is] unlikely that the overall literacy of the western provinces even rose into the range of 5-10%' (272).
- 6 Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (TSAJ 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 496.
- 7 David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University, 2005) 116 (cf. 270 n.51), generally, 111-73; Richard A. Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) 8-9, 211 n. 27; Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2007) 10-11.

education.⁸ Furthermore, this very stratification of the culture into a majority of illiterates and minority of literates led directly to the power of text-brokers, since the majority of the population was dependent upon them to access the holy text.⁹ In turn, this led to the increased authority of a (socially acknowledged) educated text-broker over an uneducated text-broker.

Thus, while there is nearly universal agreement that the historical Jesus was, in one form or another, a Jewish teacher/text-broker, the question remains for critical scholarship: On which side of the literacy line did Jesus fall?¹⁰ Stated otherwise, *what type* of Jewish teacher was Jesus? Scholars have answered this question typically in one of two ways: (1) (sometimes unreflectively) making assumptions about Jesus' literate status in the course of a broader discussion; and (2) assessing directly evidence like John 7.15. I begin with examples of assumptions regarding both Jesus' literacy and his illiteracy.

2. Jesus' Literacy and Scholarly Assumptions

Scholars often assume that Jesus was illiterate and/or uneducated. As one example, Bond claims, 'Jesus was uneducated; he was not a priest, he claimed no learning in the law'.¹¹ Similarly, Thatcher states that Jesus 'probably couldn't write at all, or at least very little' and that he had 'no real academic credentials'.¹² Sometimes the assumption of Jesus' illiteracy is based on the socio-cultural milieu of Jesus' childhood home in Galilee. For example, in his biography of Jesus, Chilton says of Galilean Jewish peasants, 'For the most part, like Jesus, they were illiterate'.¹³ Similarly, Crossan says, 'Since between 95 and 97 percent of the Jewish state was illiterate at the time of Jesus, it must be presumed that Jesus also was illiterate'.¹⁴ Alternatively, Deissmann moves from the fact that Jesus left no evidence that he was literate—that is, written documents—to positing his inability to do so as an explanation of that fact: 'Jesus of Nazareth is altogether

8 *Inter alia*, H. Gamble, 'Literacy and Book Culture', *The Dictionary of New Testament Background* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove: InterVarsity) 645.

9 On Jewish and Christian 'text-brokers', see H. Gregory Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World: Philosophers, Jews and Christians* (RFCC; New York: Routledge, 2000) 122–217.

10 Although the question is posed in this manner here in light of previous scholarly debates, discussed immediately in the main text, it is imprecise since literacy existed in gradations and John 7.15 is particularly concerned with scribal literacy. See below p. 52.

11 Helen K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 69.

12 Tom Thatcher, *Jesus the Riddler: The Power of Ambiguity in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 136, 107, respectively.

13 Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) xx.

14 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) 25. See also his *The Essential Jesus: What Jesus Really Taught* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989) 21.

unliterary. He never wrote or dictated a line'.¹⁵ That is, Deissmann assumes Jesus' lack of having authored a text means that he *was* 'unliterary'.

Other scholars assume the opposite about Jesus, that he was literate and/or educated. In a recent introduction to Jesus and the gospels, Strauss presents a trilingual synagogue-educated Jesus:

Like most Jewish boys, Jesus would have been educated in the local synagogue, where he learned the Scriptures and the Hebrew language. We know from his Nazareth sermon that he could read Hebrew (Luke 4:16–20).¹⁶ This means Jesus was probably trilingual, speaking Aramaic in the home and with friends, using Hebrew in religious contexts, and conversing in Greek in business and governmental contexts.¹⁷

Bernard says flatly, 'That [Jesus] was able to write may be assumed'.¹⁸ Like assumptions of Jesus' illiteracy, sometimes an assumption that Jesus was literate is based on the context of his upbringing. An example of this is the short *Life of Jesus* by Cadoux, in which he says, '[Jesus'] educative influence... would from an early age be supplemented at the local synagogue—where with his younger brothers and other small boys Jesus would be taught in class to read and say by heart portions of the Mosaic Law, and perhaps also to write'.¹⁹ Lee goes so far as to say that an uneducated Jesus is implausible: 'It seems safe to presume that he attended a *bet sefer* and *bet talmud* as a child and young man, because most Jewish males would have. His style of interaction with the Pharisees is not intelligible without presuming education'.²⁰ In a similar vein, Flusser states, 'When Jesus' sayings are examined against the

15 Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, rev. ed. 1927) 245, also p. 246. Jesus' failure to leave written material remains was a point of discussion already in the early Church. Cf. Augustine's refutation of the Manichaean *Epistle of Christ* in *Faust* 28.4.

16 Luke's text does not technically claim that Jesus did read; only that he stood in order to do so. Additionally, the text Jesus purportedly reads has no manuscript evidence, as it is a compilation of Isa 61.1–2a and 58.6. As I have suggested elsewhere, it may be that Luke clearly thinks Jesus capable of reading from a Hebrew text in the synagogue, but stops just short of claiming that he actually did so (see Chris Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus* [NTTSD 38; Leiden: Brill, 2009] 235).

17 Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 421. One major problem with Strauss's statement is that 'most Jewish boys' did not receive a formal education. See Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 67–8; relatedly, Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 281–2.

18 J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of John* (ed. A. H. McNeile; 2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) 2.719.

19 C. J. Cadoux, *The Life of Jesus* (Gateshead on Tyne: Pelican, 1948) 37.

20 Bernard J. Lee, *The Galilean Jewishness of Jesus: Retrieving the Jewish Origins of Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1988) 126–7.

background of contemporaneous Jewish learning...it is easy to observe that Jesus was far from uneducated'.²¹

Examples on both sides of this issue could be multiplied. These will suffice, however, for demonstrating that, sometimes, scholars simply assume Jesus' literate status one way or another.²² At times this is based on the socio-historical background of Jesus' upbringing, at others not.

The second manner in which scholars have attempted to answer whether Jesus was an educated Jewish teacher is by critically engaging the admittedly limited evidence for Jesus' literacy that exists.²³ The canonical evidence discussed is typically any or all of the following: the twelve-year old Jesus teaching in the temple in Luke 2.46–51; Luke 2.52's statement that Jesus 'increased in wisdom and in years' (NRSV); Jesus' standing to read in the Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4.16–20; Jesus' 'writing' in the ground in John 8.6, 8; texts where Jesus questions the Jewish leadership by asking 'Have you not read?', which may imply an ability to read (for example, Mark 2.25);²⁴ Jesus' identity as either a τέκτων (Mark 6.3) or son of a τέκτων (Matt 13.55);²⁵ and, of course, the Jews' question of Jesus' knowledge of letters in John 7.15. As mentioned previously, John 7.15 is the only one of these texts that explicitly discusses Jesus' literacy, and is thus the primary focus of this essay. To previous discussions of this passage we now turn.

3. Previous Assessments of John 7.15²⁶

In Foster's 2006 article 'Educating Jesus',²⁷ he collects the opinions of most of the major Johannine commentators (making rehearsal of all of them here

21 David Flusser with R. Steven Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 4th Eng. ed. 2007) 12.

22 For a brief presentation of the opinions of the nineteenth-century questers, see Paul Foster, 'Educating Jesus: The Search for a Plausible Context', *JSHJ* 4.1 (2006) 7–9. Strangely, given the topic of the book, Herman Horne, *Jesus the Teacher: Examining his Expertise in Education* (rev. Angus M. Gunn; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), does not address the issue at all.

23 Some examples are Pieter F. Craffart and Pieter J. J. Botha, 'Why Jesus Could Walk on the Sea but He Could Not Read and Write', *Neotestamentica* 39.1 (2005) 21–31; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 212–5; Craig A. Evans, 'Jewish Scripture and the Literacy of Jesus', *From Biblical Criticism to Biblical Faith: Essays in Honor of Lee Martin McDonald* (ed. William H. Brackney and Craig A. Evans; Macon: Mercer University, 2007) 41–54; Foster, 'Educating Jesus', 7–33; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.252–315; Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung* (WUNT 2.7; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981) 206–45; David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (ed. Peter C. Hodgson; London: SCM, 1972) 201–5.

24 See n. 70 below.

25 These texts are especially important for Crossan, *Jesus*, 23–6.

26 Some of the following information is rehearsed in an abbreviated manner in Keith, *Pericope*, 152–7.

27 Foster, 'Educating Jesus', 17–19.

unnecessary) and demonstrates that, contrary to the claim of Evans that this verse is sometimes taken as evidence for an illiterate Jesus, 'this is rarely suggested, and if it is, it is either heavily qualified or rebutted'.²⁸ Rather, the majority opinion 'throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' has been that the response of the Jews reflects not Jesus' illiteracy per se, but rather his lack of formal rabbinic training.²⁹ Evans himself takes this position with regards to John 7.15 and argues that the historical Jesus would have been literate enough to read the Hebrew Scriptures, but may not have received scribal training, as does Keener.³⁰ Riesner claims the text is technically silent on his elementary education, but likely excludes a formal scribal education for Jesus: 'Über die Möglichkeit einer Elementarbildung wird also an dieser Stelle nichts gesagt, wohl aber eine schriftgelehrte Schulung Jesu ausgeschlossen'.³¹ In a thorough consideration of Jesus' education, Meier too sees John 7.15 as revealing a lack of formal training: 'The demeaning reference in 7:15 is not to Jesus' failure to learn his ABCs but to his lack of formal education in Scripture under the guidance of some noted scholar—no doubt in Jerusalem!'³² Furthermore, of the three texts referring to Jesus' education that Meier discusses (John 7.15, John 8.6, and Luke 4.16–30), he claims 'this one at least provides some indirect basis for supposing that Jesus could read and comment on the Hebrew Scriptures'.³³ Thus, for Meier, 'John 7:15 indirectly intimates a reading knowledge of Hebrew Scriptures...[and] this indirect witness is the firmest evidence we have' for Jesus' literate abilities.³⁴

28 Foster, 'Educating Jesus', 18, in reference to Craig A. Evans, 'Context, Family, and Formation', *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (ed. Markus Bockmuehl; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001) 16.

29 Foster, 'Educating Jesus', 18.

30 Evans, 'Context', 16, 21; Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 282. Keener is more cautious in his *Gospel of John*, 1.712–3. Evans revisits the topic in the more recent Evans, 'Jewish Scripture', and rearticulates the same position on John 7.15 (for example, 42–43). This latter publication is in response to Craffert and Botha, 'Why Jesus', who, surprisingly, despite mentioning John 7.15 in their abstract (5) and once briefly as a claim that Jesus 'could write' (22) allow it no place in their discussion on Jesus' (il)literacy (21–32), which instead focuses upon Luke 4.16.

31 Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 243.

32 Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.269; also, 278. Regarding the Jews' comment being a 'demeaning reference' (as stated by Meier), Thomas J. Kraus, 'John 7:15B: "Knowing Letters" and (Il)literacy', *Ad Fontes: Original Manuscripts and Their Significance for Studying Early Christianity—Selected Essays* (TENTS 3; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 171–83, argues that the Jews' statement is unbiased—'No pejorative emphasis is put on social status or any lack of education' (180–81). Below, I will argue that Kraus is not correct in terms of the broader context of John 7, especially in light of 7.49.

33 Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.269.

34 Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.271.

Alternatively, Bauer sees John 7.15 as an early Christian claim of literacy responding to anti-Christian polemic that 'Jesus wäre ein Analphabet gewesen'.³⁵ Gerhardsson views John 7.15 as implying a lack of education, but nonetheless also as a dogmatic response (along with Acts 4.13) and concludes that 'critical research can hardly build too much on these sayings'.³⁶ Foster is leery of Bauer's conclusion of John 7.15 ultimately being evidence for an illiterate Jesus because, for him, 'This passage as it stands points in precisely the opposite direction, namely that Jesus "knows letters" contrary to what expectations might have suggested'.³⁷ Yet, despite this reading of the text, Foster, like Gerhardsson, believes John 7.15 to be of no help in reconstructing the historical Jesus, although for a different reason. Whereas Gerhardsson believes John 7.15 to be useless because of the dogmatic influence, Foster dismisses its witness by claiming that Jesus' literate abilities per se are not primarily in view: 'The context militates against taking this knowledge of letters as denoting the ability to read, for here it appears to refer to the skills of oral teaching and rhetoric'.³⁸

Thus, scholars disagree as to whether John 7.15 claims Jesus actually knew letters and, further, what this claim might mean for the literacy of the historical Jesus. Some think it claims Jesus was literate, but that this does not accurately reflect the historical Jesus (Bauer). Others also think it claims Jesus was literate, but that this claim is ultimately unhelpful because the passage does not portray Jesus reading or writing (Foster). Alternatively, other scholars think John 7.15 implies an illiterate Jesus but is unhelpful due to dogmatic influence (Gerhardsson). More popular is the position that John 7.15 claims only that Jesus had not received a formal scribal education. According to some scholars, in making this point, the passage leaves unaddressed the issue of elementary education (Riesner), while others believe it implicitly references a literate Jesus, or at least a Jesus capable of reading Hebrew (Evans, Keener, and Meier).

4. What Exactly is the Claim of John 7.15?

How should one sort through this phalanx of opinions regarding John 7.15? I suggest here that scholars have overlooked the actual claim of the text, and that this is unsurprising given the various sources of confusion in the passage. Following this assessment of the claim of John 7.15, I will address the passage's reflection of the historical Jesus.

35 D. Walter Bauer, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2d ed. 1925) 105.

36 Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (combined ed. with *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 13.

37 Foster, 'Educating Jesus', 19. He cites approvingly Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 314 n. 280.

38 Foster, 'Educating Jesus', 19.

Contrary to scholarly efforts to use John 7.15 as evidence for the literacy or illiteracy of the historical Jesus, the text itself suggests that the matter is not quite that simple. There are at least three major sources of confusion in John 7.15. First, confusion over the text's claim is partially a result of the seemingly contradictory nature of the passage. The first statement of the Jews ('How does this man know letters?') implies that Jesus did know letters, contrary to their expectations. Their follow-up comment ('since he has never been taught') makes explicit those expectations, however, and implies a lack of literacy/education on the part of Jesus. (Although perhaps proper elsewhere, it would be improper here to separate literacy from education. As the circumstantial participle [μὴ μεμαθηκώς] makes clear, the Jews' expectation that Jesus did not know letters is *based upon his lack of education*.) Thus, it would seem that the verse witnesses simultaneously both to Jesus' knowledge of letters and his lack of knowledge of letters. That is, there is as much evidence to support the position that John 7.15 claims Jesus was illiterate/uneducated ('since he has never been taught') as there is to support the position that John 7.15 claims Jesus was literate/educated ('How does this man know letters?').

A second source of confusion with regards to John 7.15 is that it is not always clear in the ancient record to which literate skill(s) the phrase γράμματα οἶδεν refers. If one 'knew letters', does it mean that one knew how to read?; or write?; or both? It is now clear that scholars cannot automatically assume that the two literate skills went 'hand-in-hand'.³⁹ The phrase is often translated as 'know how to read'. An example is when Thackeray translates Josephus's claim that the law commands that children be 'taught letters' (γράμματα παιδεύειν) in *Ag. Ap.* 2.25 as 'taught to read'.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there are numerous examples from non-literary papyri that demonstrate that 'not knowing letters' can refer explicitly to not being able to write, more specifically to not being able to sign one's name. To cite one Jewish example of many comparative occurrences of the phenomenon, several texts from the Babatha cache, dated to the Bar Kokhba revolt, include statements that a scribe had to sign for Babatha,⁴¹ noting that this was the case because she μὴ εἰδέναι γράμματα.⁴² Here, then, the phrase 'knowing letters' refers to signature literacy, a skill Babatha lacked. Even within discussions of John 7.15, one may note that, for example, Meier translates the phrase as 'know how to read' while Botha translates it as a claim 'that he

39 Keith, *Pericope*, 62–89.

40 Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 68–89, grants warrant to Thackeray's translation, as her study shows that Torah reading was the focus of Jewish education, not writing. Similarly, Goodman, 'Texts', 99–100.

41 For example, *P. Yadin* 15.35–36; 16.35; 22.34. For texts, see Naphtali Lewis et al., eds., *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters: Greek Papyri* (JDS; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1989).

42 *P. Yadin* 15.35–36.

could write'.⁴³ Given the multivalence of the phrase γράμματα οἶδεν, Harris wisely warns: 'It is very seldom clear how much knowledge a person needed to qualify as "knowing letters." Such expressions have to be interpreted case by case'.⁴⁴

In the specific case of John 7.15, then (and as several of the aforementioned scholars also observe), the context demonstrates that Jesus' general literacy or illiteracy is not what the Jews question. For, they are not concerned with whether Jesus could sign a bill of sale or read directional signs upon his visit to Jerusalem, what Harris deems 'craftsman's literacy'. They are concerned with a form of 'knowing letters' that stands in contrast to craftsman's literacy, termed 'scribal literacy', which is the state of literacy held by the literate elite interpreters of holy texts.⁴⁵ That is, the Jews are concerned specifically with whether Jesus' Torah knowledge/authority (cf. John 7.19–24) is undergirded by literate scribal education in the holy text. At root, then, John 7.15 does not concern whether Jesus could read or write *anything at all*, but whether he held the type of literate education attained only by a select few.⁴⁶ The Jews of John 7.15 are debating Jesus' knowledge of letters as a manner of questioning his identity as one of their own. To return to the initial point made by this article, now with some further clarification, they are questioning whether Jesus fell on their side of the *scribal* literacy line.⁴⁷

While, therefore, the specific 'letters' being questioned in John 7.15 are clearly those of the Mosaic Law,⁴⁸ there is yet a third source of confusion with regards to the text's claim about Jesus' possible knowledge of them. Confusion over what John 7.15 actually claims is also partially a result of readers' lack of attention to the Johannine narrative, or, indeed, the Johannine narrator.⁴⁹ In this sense, it is

43 Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.269; Craffert and Botha, 'Why Jesus', 22, respectively.

44 Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 6.

45 Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 7–8. Fox, 'Literacy and Power', 129, refers to this as 'sacred literacy'; van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 11, calls it 'high literacy'; and Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1987) 139, speaks of 'religious literacy'.

46 Thus, Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 273, interprets the Jews' astonishment: 'How can Jesus appeal to the Scriptures! He has not made a proper study of them! He does not belong to the guild of the Scribes'. One should note, however, that scribes appear in John only in the later textual addition of John 7.53–8.11 (at John 8.3).

47 Cf. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.269.

48 C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction and Commentary with Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 2d ed. 1978) 317; Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 273 n. 3; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 311; Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. Francis Noel Davey; London: Faber & Faber, 2d ed. 1947) 314; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1.712; Francis J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5–12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 75.

49 For the importance of the narrator and his point of view, see Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1978) 148–51, 196–262; on John specifically, R. Alan Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*:

crucially important that in John 7.15 the observation of Jesus' (lack of) literate abilities is not a statement of the narrator, but rather a statement that the narrator places on the lips of Jesus' interlocutors, the Jews. That is, *the Johannine narrator never claims that Jesus knew letters or that he had not been educated*. Rather, the narrator claims that Jesus' opponents associate his teaching with literacy—knowledge of letters—but that this association causes problems for their assumption that Jesus was uneducated. Contrary to Foster, then, the context does not 'militate...against taking this knowledge of letters as denoting the ability to read... [because] it appears to refer to the skills of oral teaching and rhetoric'.⁵⁰ Quite the opposite, according to the narrative, Jesus' Jewish opponents themselves draw the explicit connection between Jesus' 'skills of oral teaching and rhetoric' and his knowledge of letters/lack of education. The Jews associate Jesus' pedagogical abilities with someone who 'knows letters' as they do, a person with scribal literacy; yet they are quite certain that Jesus 'had not been educated' and thus had not attained the literate abilities that would enable this level of teaching.

These three sources of confusion—the contradictory nature of the Jews' statement, the multivalence of *γράμματα ᾔδεν*, and insufficient attention to the position of the narrator—have thus hindered efforts at assessing the claim of John 7.15 with regards to Jesus' literacy. Contrary to the aforementioned scholarly assessments of the passage, however, the claim of John 7.15 is more complicated than being a claim either for Jesus' literacy or illiteracy. Indeed, and to repeat the point just made, John 7.15 claims neither that Jesus was illiterate nor that he was literate. Rather, John 7.15 claims that, *although Jesus' opponents assumed him not to have scribal literacy, they also acknowledged that he taught as if he did*. In contrast to Matt 7.29, then, for example, John 7.15 claims Jesus' pedagogical style is not demarcated from the literate scribes, but rather comparable.

John 7.15's broader context in John confirms this reading of the passage. As in 7.15, the dividing line between those who are educated in the law and those who are not (scribal literacy) rises to the surface of the text in 7.45–52. The Pharisees send 'temple police' (NRSV) to arrest Jesus in 7.32 due to the public unrest his teaching is causing. They return empty-handed in 7.45, however, and must answer for their lack of action. When they attest Jesus' teaching prowess in 7.46, their superiors offer a quick rebuke, in which they distinguish between the uneducated gullible crowd and the educated teachers of the law: 'Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the

A Study in Literary Design (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 15–49. Since there is no indication that the implied author's point of view in John is different from that of the narrator, it is unnecessary to distinguish between the two for present purposes. Cf. Chatman, *Story*, 148–51; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 15–18.

⁵⁰ Foster, 'Educating Jesus', 19.

Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, *which does not know the law*—they are accursed’ (John 7.47–49, NRSV; emphasis added). That is, the crowd can be understood, or perhaps pitied, for having been duped by Jesus and questioning if he might be the Messiah (7.40–43). They may even have a limited knowledge of the Scriptures, as 7.42 suggests, but compared to the ‘chief priests and Pharisees’ in 7.45, they cannot even be said to ‘know the law’ (7.49) at all. The Jewish leadership, however, knows the law, and thus knows better.

Further confirming this dividing line is the immediate chastisement of Nicodemus. Immediately (and ironically) questioning his comrades’ knowledge of Torah, he implies the illegality of their preemptive (negative) judgment of Jesus’ messianic/prophetic status: ‘Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?’ (7.51, NRSV). They reply, ‘Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee’ (7.52, NRSV).⁵¹ Based on his ability to search the holy text, an ability apparently not shared by the accursed crowd and/or Galileans, Nicodemus should know that Jesus could not be a/the prophet.⁵² The common thread between the Jewish leadership’s chastisement of the temple police and Nicodemus is their insistence that those who know the Torah, who can search it for themselves—that is, the Jewish leadership—should carry the official opinion with regards to Jesus’ identity. Stated otherwise, authoritative opinion and pronouncement are the prerogatives of those who fall on the scribal literate side of the dividing line. The temple police of 7.45 are chastised for suggesting that Jesus—a Galilean—fell on the Jewish leadership’s side of that line. Also within the ranks of the Torah-knowing Jewish leadership, the Jews of 7.15 are confused by the fact that Jesus seemingly ‘knows letters’. Frustrating the attempts of the Jewish leadership to discount Jesus entirely in John 7, then, according to the Johannine narrator, is that Jesus carries himself as one of their own, despite their conviction that he—again, a Galilean—is one of the crowd who ‘does not know the law’.⁵³

Therefore, the claim of John 7.15 is that Jesus was capable of convincing his contemporaries equally of two things: (1) he was not literate in a scribal-educated sense; (2) he taught as if he was. Further, unlike the narrator of Luke 4, who attributes to Jesus the literate skill of public reading (albeit without claiming it directly), the Johannine narrator offers no authoritative commentary as to whether Jesus’ opponents’ assumptions regarding his lack of education were correct.

⁵¹ On the possibility of the Jews’ statement here being an example of Johannine irony, since Jonah was from Galilee, see Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1.734–5.

⁵² NA²⁷ follows the majority of witnesses with the indefinite reading προφήτης; P⁶⁶ offers the definite reading ὁ προφήτης.

⁵³ Similarly, Hoskyns, *Fourth Gospel*, 314: ‘To the Jewish authorities Jesus is one of the ignorant crowd which is accursed and *knoweth not the law* (vii. 49)’ (emphasis original).

5. The Plausibility of the Johannine Memory of Jesus' Literacy

I suggest that John 7.15's claim is historically plausible in light of first-century Christianity's corporate memory(ies) of Jesus' literate abilities. Space prohibits a full discussion of criteria of authenticity, so I acknowledge here that undergirding the following approach to the plausibility of John 7.15 are recent emphases on the role of social/cultural memory in the development of the Jesus tradition.⁵⁴ Three insights from these studies are particularly important for what follows. First, with others, I affirm that the only access to the 'historical Jesus'—here meaning the man who walked, talked, and died in Judea and Galilee in the first century CE—that modern scholars have is through the early Christian memories of him recorded in the gospel texts. That is, the 'remembered Jesus' is what we find in the gospels and the only Jesus with which we have to work.⁵⁵

Second, this is the case because, from the perspective of social memory theory, the (form-critical) idea that there is a 'historical kernel' available (if only scholars can peel away the layers of later Christian faith) is a chimera. Any act of commemoration—be it John 7.15, the Vietnam War Memorial, or Guy Fawkes Day—is a complex interworking of the past putting pressure on the present's interpretation of it while the present simultaneously provides the only lens(es) through which the past can be viewed. This approach therefore does not deny the role that the

54 For succinct introductions to social/cultural memory, see Jan Assmann, 'Introduction: What is "Cultural Memory"?' *Religion and Cultural Memory* (CMP; Stanford: Stanford University, 2006) 1–30; Alan Kirk, 'Social and Cultural Memory', *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (ed. Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher; SemSt 52; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005) 1–24. With particular reference to the Jesus tradition, see Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, 'Jesus Tradition as Social Memory', *Memory, Tradition, and Text* (ed. Kirk and Thatcher) 25–42; Anthony Le Donne, 'Theological Distortion in the Jesus Tradition: A Study in Social Memory Theory', *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity* (ed. Loren T. Stuckenbruck, Stephen C. Barton, and Benjamin G. Wold; WUNT 212; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 163–77; Jens Schröter, 'The Historical Jesus and the Sayings Tradition: Comments on Current Research', *Neot* 30.1 (1996) 151–68. For fuller applications to the Jesus tradition, see Jens Schröter, *Erinnerung an Jesu Worte: Studien zur Rezeption der Logienüberlieferung in Markus, Q und Thomas* (WMANT 76; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1997) and two new studies: Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco: Baylor University, 2009); Rafael Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance, and Text* (LNTS; London: T. & T. Clark, 2009). Despite the title, Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, is not an application of social/cultural memory theory, although he arrives at many conclusions similar to the above-referenced scholars and will thus be included here. He deals with the implications of social memory theory for his own work in James D. G. Dunn, 'Social Memory and the Oral Jesus Tradition', *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity* (ed. Stuckenbruck, Barton, and Wold) 179–94.

55 See especially Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 130–2; James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (London: SPCK, 2005) 30–1.

convictions of early Christian communities played in shaping the Jesus tradition, perhaps even into historical inaccuracy. Indeed, it views them as thoroughly necessary: 'Does the localization process have the capacity to distort one's memory? The answer to this is not only yes, but always'.⁵⁶ This approach does, however, reserve a role for the past (and past interpretations of the past) in the precise manner in which the present distorts the past. In other words, commemorations like gospel texts are neither purely mirror reflections of the commemorating communities nor static, anchored, pure images of the past—they are inextricably a combination of both present and past.⁵⁷ In some cases, the past may be more dominant in the traditioning process; in other cases the present may be more dominant.⁵⁸ The important point presently, however, is that any act of commemoration is an indissoluble combination of the present and the past.

Third, this last point is important because it dictates that the starting point for asking questions about the historical Jesus must be the early Christian texts *as specific instances of the reception of memories of Jesus*. Only in light of early Christian texts, and their contexts, can one then draw inferences regarding the 'actual past' and how it may have impacted that present commemoration—that is, not on the basis of a criteria-sanitized 'historical Jesus' and/or dissected Jesus tradition. Thus, Schröter, whose work is on the sayings tradition, argues for '[die] Geschichte der Jesusüberlieferung als Rezeptionsgeschichte der Jesusverkündigung'.⁵⁹ Part of this approach is thus accounting for *factors within those contexts of reception that could have affected the shape of the memory*.

This methodological framework therefore highlights that what one may draw from the text with regards to the 'actual past' are indeed *inferences*, as its focus is primarily upon the memory-shape and secondarily upon what (in the past and present) could have created that memory-shape. Nevertheless, its strength is that it recognizes the important past/present dialectic in any commemoration and the resultant need to pay close attention to the various Jesus-memories and contexts of remembrance. A related strength is that it accounts for the role of the present communities in the shape of Jesus-memory without uncritically

56 Le Donne, 'Theological Distortion', 166. 'Distort' here carries no negative connotations but rather refers to the fact that the past can only ever be interpreted through the lens of the present (p. 167).

57 See here the trenchant criticism of gospel scholarship in this regard by social memory theorist Barry Schwartz, 'Christian Origins: Historical Truth and Social Memory', *Memory, Tradition, and Text* (ed. Kirk and Thatcher) 50–4.

58 The past has a particularly impactful role in the commemoration of violence. See Chris Keith and Tom Thatcher, 'The Scar of the Cross: The Violence Ratio and the Earliest Christian Memories of Jesus', *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text: Beyond the Oral and the Written Gospel* (ed. Tom Thatcher; Waco: Baylor University, 2008) 197–214; Alan Kirk, 'The Memory of Violence and the Death of Jesus in Q', *Memory, Tradition, and Text* (ed. Kirk and Thatcher) 191–206.

59 Schröter, *Erinnerung*, 483 (emphasis removed). Cf. Kirk and Thatcher, 'Jesus Tradition', 39.

asserting that the shape of the memory is a mirror reflection of that community, detached from the historical progression that led to the community in the first place. Therefore, as Le Donne observes, 'The historian's task is not simply to sift through the data looking for facts...but to account for these early interpretations by explaining the perceptions and memories that birthed them'.⁶⁰

With its focus on early Christian memories of Jesus and the possible impact(s) of the historical Jesus contributing to those memories, this study also forwards two other recent emphases in historical Jesus research by applying them to John 7.15. First, it forwards the conviction that scholars should pay attention to the reception of Jesus by his opponents, as presented in early Christian tradition.⁶¹ Second, the present study affirms the appropriateness of the argument for plausibility based on the later effects of the historical Jesus: 'What we know of Jesus as a whole must allow him to be recognized within his contemporary Jewish context and must be compatible with the Christian (canonical and noncanonical) history of his effects'.⁶²

In light of this approach to the plausibility of John 7.15's claim, therefore, I will here briefly review the various memories of Jesus' literacy in first-century gospel tradition and posit that the claim of John 7.15 plausibly accounts for these diverse memory-shapes. Importantly, Jesus is remembered as an educated Torah teacher in one stream of tradition in the early Church, while in a second stream of tradition he is remembered as someone who was clearly outside that limited group of literate elite. As is clear already, John 7.15 participates in both streams of tradition.

a. *First-Century Images of Jesus as a Member of the Literate Elite*

Already in the first century CE, early Christians remembered Jesus as a literate Torah teacher. The most explicit first-century portrayal of Jesus as a member of the educated elite is the account of his synagogue activities in Luke 4.16-20. As mentioned already, Luke technically never claims that Jesus read the scroll, only that he stood in order to do so (4.16).⁶³ Nonetheless, Luke's portrayal of Jesus as a literate Jewish teacher is clear. Not only is Jesus familiar with and capable of handling a scroll, unrolling it (4.17) and rolling it back up (4.20), Luke claims he also can search (what would have been) *scriptio continua* and

60 Le Donne, 'Theological Distortion', 165. Similarly, Schröter, 'Historical Jesus', 153: 'Every approach to the historical Jesus behind the Gospels has to explain how these writings could have come into being as the earliest descriptions of this person'.

61 Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Who Do My Opponents Say That I Am?: An Investigation of the Accusations Against Jesus* (LHJS/LNTS 327; London: T. & T. Clark, 2008).

62 Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 212.

63 See n. 16 above.

find a specific Hebrew Bible text (4.17).⁶⁴ Assuming that Luke has here modified Mark's account of Jesus' activities in the Capernaum synagogue in Mark 6,⁶⁵ two Lukan alterations are highly significant. First, Luke has added Jesus' demonstration of literate skills associated with the educated elite. Second, Luke has removed the identification of Jesus as an artisan (ὁ τέκτων)⁶⁶ in Mark 6.3 (discussed below); that is, as a person outside the Torah-literate elite. Instead, Luke has the synagogue audience identify Jesus merely as 'Joseph's son' (Luke 4.22).

Staying within the gospel of Luke, earlier Luke claims that Jesus was capable of participating in informed discussion on the law even as a twelve-year old in the temple.⁶⁷ Luke does not, in this context, portray Jesus as using literate skills, but the significant point is that he portrays Jesus as a peer of Torah teachers who would have been in the literate minority. Jesus appears not as a student (*contra* Marshall⁶⁸) but as an equal member of the discussion.⁶⁹ Despite the teachers of the law and their expectations based on his youth, Luke claims Jesus sat *among* them ('in the midst of the teachers'; 2.46), amazing them with his understanding (2.47). As Jesus and the teachers are in the temple, the most natural assumption is that their discussion, and Jesus' 'understanding', is centered on the law.

Along with John 7.15, these Lukan texts provide first-century evidence that Christians viewed Jesus as an individual capable of scribal access to the Hebrew Scriptures (Luke 4.16–20) and capable of producing amazement amongst scribal-literate peers (Luke 2.46–47; John 7.15).⁷⁰

64 Also mentioned in n. 16 above, there is no manuscript evidence for the cited passage in Luke 4.18–19.

65 Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 179.

66 Following, *inter alia*, κ B C D. P⁴⁵ most probably reads ὁ τοῦ τέκτονος υἱός. Cf. Wayne C. Kannaday, *Apologetic Discourse and the Scribal Tradition: Evidence of the Influence of Apologetic Interests on the Text of the Canonical Gospels* (SBLTCS 5; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) 118.

67 Josephus makes a similar claim regarding himself in *Vita* 9.

68 Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 127–8.

69 Similarly, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 155 n. 10.

70 Some may also cite passages like Mark 2.25 as evidence that Jesus himself could or did read the passages he references. So Evans, 'Jewish Scripture', 50: 'But Jesus' rhetorical and pointed "have you not read?"...would have little argumentative force if he himself could not read'. These passages are not included in the present discussion, however, because they do not necessitate that Jesus could read or was a member of the scribal guild. In fact, the rhetorical force of the question *could* hinge on the fact that Jesus was not able to read the passage—'Surely you, the literate elite Torah teachers, have read such and such a text...why even I, not one of your own, know the passage that says...' Cultural knowledge of the contents of a text does not *necessarily* require literate access to the text.

b. *First-Century Images of Jesus as Outside the Scribal Elite*

Just as the above sources suggest that Jesus was educated and literate, other first-century Jesus traditions place Jesus outside scribal literate culture. As mentioned above, Mark 6.3 identifies Jesus as an artisan (ὁ τέκτων). That this explicit identification of Jesus as *within* the artisan guild is simultaneously an implicit identification of Jesus as *outside* the scribal literate Torah-teaching guild is confirmed not only by Luke's (and others')⁷¹ amelioration of the claim but also by the Markan narrative itself. For the audience's question, 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?' (NRSV), is one in a string of questions that serve as immediate reaction to Jesus' pedagogical activities in the synagogue in Mark 6.2: 'They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?"' (NRSV). Importantly, the crowd is astonished because it is *this man*⁷² (the τέκτων) who is teaching, exhibiting a wisdom which *has been given to him* (not earned through scribal training).

Similar to Mark 6.3 and earlier in Mark's gospel, Mark 1.22 claims that Jesus amazed a synagogue crowd and places Jesus outside the class of the literate teachers. Mark 1.22, though, adds the qualifier that 'he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes' (NRSV). Therefore, whereas Luke 4.16–20 claims Jesus acted as a literate teacher in the synagogue, and the Jews of John 7.15 claim Jesus taught as a scribal literate teacher, Mark identifies Jesus, based on his teaching, as separate from the scribes who, as γραμματεῖς, were those most familiar with the γράμματα. Similarly, Matt 7.28 claims that Jesus' teachings astonished 'the crowds', and then 7.29 records nearly verbatim the words of Mark 1.22. These statements about Jesus may reference the fact that, whereas the scribes appealed to established tradition as their source of authority, Jesus' source of authority was himself.⁷³ More important, however, is that the respective narrators account for the reactions of 'the crowd' and the synagogue attendees by locating Jesus outside the scribes. Scholars who conceptualize the distinction between Jesus and the scribes in these passages as based generally on knowledge of Jewish texts and tradition miss the importance of the studies mentioned at the beginning of this article that have established Jesus' first-century context as a low-literacy environment. They thus miss the subtle distinction by the narrators who, in the world of literacy 'haves' and 'have-nots', place Jesus outside the group of 'haves'. Perhaps significant as well, Acts 4.13 places Jesus' followers outside the

71 Matt 13.55 has Jesus' hometown crowd identify him as 'the son of the artisan/carpenter' rather than 'the artisan/carpenter'. The Palestinian Syriac manuscript tradition omits ὁ τέκτων altogether. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2d ed. 2000) 75–6.

72 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 242, on the derogatory οὔτος.

73 Cf. France, *Gospel of Mark*, 102.

realm of formal scribal education, describing them as illiterate (ἀγράμματοι) and unlearned (ἰδιῶται).⁷⁴

The previous discussion is not exhaustive of the early Christian evidence. It will suffice, however, to demonstrate that early Christians remembered Jesus simultaneously as one who ‘knew letters’ in a scribal sense and as one who did not ‘know letters’ in this sense; as one who taught like scribes and one who did not. Interestingly, Jesus’ pedagogical skills or style apparently served as the basis for both convictions. Furthermore, these two streams of tradition continue beyond the first century CE. In the third century CE, Eusebius will accept the claim that Jesus penned a letter to Abgar the Toparch, and the apocryphal *Narrative of Joseph of Arimathea* will claim Jesus wrote a letter to the cherubim.⁷⁵ Similarly in the third century CE, Origen will wrestle not only with Jesus’ identification as a τέκτων and Celsus’s exploitation of it, but also the latter’s exploitation of the presumed illiterate status of Jesus’ followers, mere ‘fisherfolk and tax collectors who had not even a primary education’.⁷⁶ Jesus’ educational status, therefore, was a sustained *topos* in early Christianity from its inception onward.

c. *The Plausibility of John 7.15*

Thus, the corporate early Christian memory of Jesus’ literacy contradictorily includes individual receptions of a non-scribal Jesus and a scribal Jesus. My proposal is that the claim of John 7.15 that Jesus was able to confuse those around him with regards to his literate abilities plausibly accounts for both the corporate memory-shape and individual receptions in gospel texts.

I must first note, however, a seemingly alternative solution that recommends itself. This theory is that Jesus was originally remembered as non-scribal (for example, Mark 6.3), but as Christianity itself emerged into a more scribally

74 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), 13, claims, ‘In the present case, the epithet [ἰδιῶται] may bear some of the implications of the Pharisaic distinction between the Associate and the ‘*am-ha’ ares*’. In addition to commentary discussions, see Thomas J. Kraus, ‘“Uneducated”, “Ignorant”, or Even “Illiterate”? Aspects and Background for an Understanding of ΑΓΡΑΜΜΑΤΟΙ (and ΙΔΙΩΤΑΙ) in Acts 4.13’, *Ad Fontes*, 149–70; and particularly Allen Hilton, ‘The Dumb Speak: Early Christian Illiteracy and Pagan Criticism’ (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1997). Evans, ‘Jewish Scripture’, 53–4, cites Jesus’ status as a rabbi who teaches followers as contributing towards an argument that Jesus was literate. The implication of the present argument is that Acts 4.13, which Evans treats on p. 43, points in the opposite direction.

75 Eusebius *Eccl. hist.* 1.13.5; *Narrative of Joseph of Arimathea* 3.4, respectively. It is possible that dictation is in view, but neither specifies the usage of an amanuensis and thus they are open to the interpretation that Jesus authors the letters himself. On a fifth-century version of the Abgar legend in the *Doctrina Addai* that does specify an amanuensis, see H. J. W. Drijvers, ‘The Abgar Legend’, *New Testament Apocrypha* (ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; 2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, rev. ed. 1991) 1.493.

76 Origen *Cels.* 6.36, 1.62 (Chadwick), respectively. On the topic of pagan criticism of Christian illiteracy, see Hilton, ‘Dumb Speak’, regrettably unpublished.

dominated religion, portrayals of Jesus became increasingly scribal (for example, Luke 4.16–20). Crossan and Kelber both advocate a version of this theory, with Kelber implying John 7.15 as a mid-point in this scribal transition.⁷⁷

My proposal, however, does not deny the possibility, or even likelihood, of this historical development of the Jesus-memory(ies) but rather concerns why it would develop into that specific shape at all. Did Luke (or whoever first envisioned Jesus as a scribal literate) create that memory *ex nihilo* in his own (or someone else's; Paul's?⁷⁸) scribal-literate image? (That is, Luke's present almost entirely informed his remembrance of Jesus in Luke 4.) Or, could one plausibly attribute the memory of Jesus as a scribal literate to the impact and initial reception/memory of the historical Jesus by his contemporaries? (That is, the past of Jesus—while not requiring that the historical Jesus was a scribal literate—informed and/or enabled Luke's remembrance of him as a scribal literate.)

Although both proposals are possible, I regard it as more probable that the catalyst for remembering Jesus as a scribal literate *and* as a non-scribal individual is traceable to the historical Jesus because of the social circumstances of the reception of Jesus-memory. In the context of the historical Jesus (as well as the context of later Christians), literacy, including scribal literacy, was not a well-defined social reality but rather was dependent upon the perception of individuals who judged whether one 'knew letters', as do the Jews of John 7.15. The literate skills of the person judging played a significant role in these attributions of literacy. A clear example of this phenomenon is the case of the Greco-Roman Egyptian village scribe Petaus.⁷⁹ Petaus's literate skills did not extend beyond his ability to sign his name and his short formula marking reception of a document. Yet Petaus defended another town clerk against a charge of 'illiteracy' by pointing to the fact that the scribe had demonstrated his literacy by being able to sign his documents. That is, while the limited ability of signing documents was sufficient for garnering that scribe the accusation of 'illiterate', it was also sufficient for garnering from Petaus—someone whose literate skills did not extend beyond that ability—a defense of 'literate'. Petaus's own level of literacy impacted his judgment of his colleague's literacy.

77 Crossan, *Jesus*, 23–6; Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1983) 18. Kelber claims the transition of portrayals of Jesus went from Mark (less scribal) to Matt (rabbinic scribal).

78 Space prohibits further investigation, but I regard it as possible that, at Luke 4.16–20, Luke remembers Jesus in *imago Pauli*, as Paul likely would have been able to enter a synagogue and read from a scroll. As the above makes clear, however, this was because certain aspects of Jesus' own teaching career enabled remembering him as such.

79 Herbert C. Youtie, 'Βραδέως γρόφων: Between Literacy and Illiteracy', *GRBS* 12.2 (1971): 239–61; repr. in his *Scriptunculae II* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1973) 629–51.

In such a literary context, and in light of the gospels' broad testimony that Jesus' audience often included a mix of (Jerusalem-affiliated) scribal literates such as Pharisees and scribes with his disciples and/or 'the crowd' of agrarian villagers and social outcasts (for example, Matt 9.10–11; 12.38, 46; Mark 2.4, 6; 7.1–2, 14–17; 8.34; 11.27; 12.12; Luke 11.29, 37; 14.1–4; 15.1–2; John 7.15, 20, 32, 48–49; 9.2, 35–41; 12.12–19), I regard it as thoroughly plausible that different social classes could have remembered Jesus' literacy differently, depending on the literate skills they possessed, or lack thereof. In other words, it is possible—indeed likely—that a pharisaical temple envoy and an agrarian family in Jerusalem for a festival would have walked away from witnessing, for example, Jesus' battle with the scribal elite over Moses in John 7 (or similar episodes) with differing convictions regarding his scribal status. And a primary factor affecting their judgment of his literate status would have been that person's or group's own literate status.

Therefore, under this suggestion, Jesus' initial impact upon/reception by his own contemporaries could have plausibly contributed to the later growth of early Christian memories of his literacy that attribute to him scribal status, non-scribal status, and a literate status that is capable of creating confusion. Ultimately, then, in light of the remembered Jesus in first-century texts (or, in Theissen and Winter's language, the 'later effects' of the historical Jesus) and the social contexts of initial and later remembrance, one must, at least, regard John 7.15's claim as historically plausible.⁸⁰

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, this article primarily establishes that the claim of John 7.15 is not that Jesus was literate or illiterate, but that Jesus was capable of making the Jews question his scribal literacy. Secondly, this essay proposes that the claim of the narrator plausibly accounts for the individual receptions and corporate memories of Jesus' literacy in the early Church. He was able to convince his audience that his teaching was underscored by scribal literacy and a lack of scribal education that would enable such literacy. It is again critical to note here that this conclusion concerns early Christian memories of Jesus' literacy and the plausible explanation for their shape in light of Jesus' reception by his

80 This claim about the Johannine narrative does not ignore the otherwise well-attested presence of 'semi-literates' in the Greco-Roman world. To the contrary, the text implies that, like semi-literates, Jesus was able to straddle the line between literacy and illiteracy. The further claim of the Johannine narrative, however, is that in the particular form of *scribal* literacy found in Second Temple Judaism, which centered on the law, semi-literacy was uncommon. In John, one either has scribal literacy or does not; thus the paradox of the Jesus of John 7.15 for his opponents. On semi-literates, see Youtie, 'Ἐραδῆως', 239–61.

contemporaries and later Christians. It does not necessitate, therefore, that the historical Jesus *was* literate on par with recognized authorities such as Pharisees and scribes. Rather, it necessitates only that, on occasion(s), he was able to force those authorities (whether purposefully or not), as well as his completely illiterate contemporaries, to reassess their assumptions about his scribal (il)literacy and (lack of) training based on his teaching or via winning an interpretive duel. Thus, even if the narrator's claim in John 7.15 is historically plausible, this affirmation of the Johannine narrator does not ultimately settle the matter of whether Jesus fell into the literate or illiterate camp of Second Temple Jewish teachers. Indeed, it resists specifically that approach to assessing Jesus and claims rather that Jesus was the type of Jewish teacher who was able to straddle the line between illiterate/uneducated and literate/educated teachers. Worth observing, however, is that if the historical Jesus was widely known as an educated literate Jewish teacher, a member of the trained scribal elite, there would perhaps have been no rhetorical payoff for remembering him as someone capable of straddling the line between scribal literacy and illiteracy, as does John 7.15.