Literacy, Iconoclasm, and a Maddening Portrait of Jesus

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We are fifteen years into the new millennium and books about Jesus continue to proliferate at a rate seemingly on pace with the productivity of the so-called "first quest." While there is a certain level of controversy attached to many attempts by scholars to situate Jesus in his historical, social, and religious contexts, few contemporary reconstructions of Jesus in recent memory have had the potential to raise the ire of both academics and contemporary Christians like the one offered by Chris Keith. His 2014 book, *Jesus against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict*, is the final volume in a trilogy of works devoted to examining a series of interrelated questions including (1) whether Jesus could read and write, (2) perceptions about those abilities by his contemporaries, (3) the relationship between Jesus and Jewish religious teachers, and (4) the implications these discussions have for our understanding of the various ways in which Jesus was remembered and passed on by earliest tradents.[1] These three works fit within a much larger career project in which Keith seeks to dethrone the criteria of authenticity[2] while making use of what he refers to as the Jesus-memory approach.[3]

1. The other two books in Keith's three-part project are *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus* (NTTSD 48; Leiden: Brill, 2009); and *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (LNTS 413; London: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2011).

2. Decades of historical Jesus research have relied upon the so-called criteria of authenticity to reconstruct and provide a purportedly "objective" portrait of Jesus' life and teachings. Perhaps the most notable project to make use of the criteria is John P. Meier's multivolume work *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 5 vols. (New Haven: Anchor Yale, 1991, 1994, 2001, 2009, 2015); for a detailed exposition of the most commonly used criteria, see chapter 6 of Meier's first volume, which is entitled "Criteria: How Do We Decide What Comes from Jesus?"

3. In addition to the works listed in n1 above, other works in which Keith pursues this agenda include a volume coedited with Anthony Le Donne, *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T & T

The main argument of the present book is that Jesus' status as a teacher and his conflict with the Jewish religious authorities were interrelated. Keith claims that Jesus was not a scribal literate teacher though the way he taught often gave outsiders the impression that he was.[4] This brought Jesus into direct conflict with the religious elite, who not only possessed scribal literacy but also knew that he did not, and therefore sought to discredit him on that basis. He further suggests that the controversy between Jesus and the religious elite, rather than being a literary fiction, is rooted in a historical conflict, a fact that is often overlooked by scholars. Two major considerations that must be taken into account are the different levels of literacy that existed in the ancient world and the disagreement—even within the NT—about whether or not Jesus was a learned teacher.[5] Whereas Mark and Matthew depict rejections of Jesus' scribal literate status (Mark 6:3/Matt 13:55), John has audiences question his scribal literacy (John 7:15), while Luke clearly presents him as a scribal literate teacher (Luke 4). What are we to make of this disagreement among the evangelists? Despite this disparate presentation in the NT, Keith insists that all four gospels root the conflict between Jesus and the religious elite in the related contexts of Scripture and authority.

Whether intentionally or not, Keith's argument accomplishes something that I refer to in my own teaching as "problematizing Chalcedon." The Chalcedonian definition (451 CE)—responsible for dogmatizing the position that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine at the same time—set the lines for "orthodox" expressions of Christology within traditional creedal Christianity. To problematize Chalcedon is thus to overemphasize the humanity of Jesus at the expense of his divinity or vice versa. To be sure, many moderns regularly problematize Chalcedon unknowingly. Much like early Christians with a Docetic Christology,[6] many Western Christians, including those who regularly confess the ecumenical creeds, quite naturally conceive of an exalted Jesus without giving serious thought to his humdrum human existence. Perhaps because of this persistent cultural myopia, Keith's argument has the evocative power to compel some into thinking critically about and in some cases responding

Clark, 2011), and several articles, including "Social Memory Theory and the Gospels Research: The First Decade (Part One)," *Early Christianity* 6.3 (forthcoming 2015);4 and "Social Memory Theory and the Gospels Research: The First Decade (Part Two)," *Early Christianity* 6.4 (forthcoming 2015).

4. Against the all-to-common tendency to lump many different types of abilities under the category of literacy, Keith is very careful in chapter 1 to distinguish between different types and various levels of literacy. A lack of precision in discussing literacy can easily cloud readers' perceptions about Keith's claims.

5. Here Keith highlights six factors that demonstrate the complexity of literacy and the scribal culture during Jesus' time: majority illiteracy, degrees of literacy, reading and writing as separate skills, multilingualism, scribal literacy, and social perception of literacy; see 20–37.

6. Most scholarship on the Johannine epistles regards this christological dispute as the situation that gave rise to their composition. The author of these letters is concerned to demonstrate that Jesus was in fact human while those who have left the Johannine churches appear to have rejected the idea that Jesus "came in the flesh" (cf. e.g., 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). The notion that Jesus was divine and only seemed to be human was eventually labeled "Docetism" (from the Greek word *dokeō*, "to seem") and condemned as a heretical teaching at the council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. Strangely, many Western Christians disregard the idea of Jesus' humanity in a manner similar to the early Docetists, while focusing exclusively on Jesus' divinity.

viscerally to such concerns. Keith's work has also successfully drawn the attention of a handful of prominent Jesus scholars whose scholarship is rooted in the assumption that the criteria can get us back to the authentic words and deeds of Jesus.

The glaringly obvious question is, if Jesus was not able to read the Scriptures—the interpretation of which lies at the heart of his controversies with the religious authorities—then how could he have had any authority as a teacher? Keith's contention that Jesus did not hold scribal literacy and his skepticism over the value of the criteria have brought about the strongest objections from detractors. However, in my estimation, these two elements of Keith's thesis are compelling and have something to offer both historical Jesus research and contemporary Christianity. A closer look at the intentional and unintentional iconoclasm in Keith's argument will help us parse out the potential value of this argument going forward.

INTENTIONAL ICONOCLASM

There can be little doubt that Keith's most intentional iconoclastic arrows are directed at the grand enterprise of historical Jesus research, and in particular its historical positivist slant. Nearly a century of Jesus research has proceeded under the assumption that the criteria of authenticity can get us back to a historical window through which we can view a more-or-less reliable picture of the past. Such conceptions do not regard the end result of the historical task as a subjective reconstruction but rather an objective representation.[7] This approach fails to recognize the inherently idiosyncratic nature of both history as narrativized unity and historiography as a limited and socially located scholarly pursuit. While other scholars have made similar assertions about the failure of the criteria, Keith has done the most far-reaching critique of how form criticism—the basis for the criteria approach—is unable to get us to an objective portrait of Jesus and is, to quote Morna Hooker, "the wrong tool."[8] Keith believes that incorporating the assumptions of form criticism as a means of getting back to the authentic words and deeds of Jesus is where the historical Jesus enterprise has failed, and I largely agree with him.[9] I would probably stop short of

7. To quote Keith directly, "Postmodern historiography . . . has shown conclusively the erroneous nature of historical positivism, which assumes that we can attain an objective reconstruction of the past. In the most recent developments of this stream of historical Jesus research, the attempt is not to reconstruct the past over against the Gospels, but to represent the past in light of the Gospels" (*Jesus against the Scribal Elite*, 71).

8. Morna Hooker, "On Using the Wrong Tool," *Theology* 75 (1972) 570–81.

9. On this assertion he has elsewhere written: "From the perspective of social memory theory, scholars in search of authentic Jesus traditions might as well be in search of unicorns, the lost city of Atlantis, and the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Not only are there no longer Jesus traditions that reflect solely the actual past, there never were. In other words, there is no memory, no preserved past, and no access to it, without interpretation. The Jesus-memory approach therefore agrees with the criteria approach that the written Gospels reflect an interpreted past of Jesus; it disagrees, however, with whether there are, in the midst of those interpretations, un-interpreted Jesus traditions that one can separate

jettisoning the criteria altogether and take a more nuanced stance, especially since I am not completely convinced that embarrassment—if not the criterion, then certainly the idea—is completely devoid of value. On that point, I am not satisfied that Luke's presentation of Jesus as a scribal literate teacher isn't rooted in an embarrassment at how Jesus is presented elsewhere. How else might we explain Luke's very different portrait of Jesus, with his ability to unroll a scroll, locate, then read from Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:16–20), compared to his presentation elsewhere? I am not saying here that we should use the *criterion* of embarrassment to deliberate on the historicity of this event, only that we should consider the possibility of Luke's own embarrassment at an illiterate Jesus. At the end of the day, however, recovering the "authentic" Jesus through these criteria or through some other method is simply not realistic given the vagaries of our historical knowledge. This is not to say that there is no such thing as "what actually happened," but rather that there is no unmediated access to "what actually happened." This is one reason why I think Keith is on to something important with his Jesus-memory approach.

In response to (or perhaps *reaction against*)[10] using the criteria of authenticity to isolate a seemingly pristine version of the historical Jesus, Keith, along with several other recent scholars, has helped to pioneer the social memory approach within historical Jesus studies.[11] In so doing, Keith aims to redefine the historian's task as one of careful, limited, and subjective reconstruction of *the ways in which Jesus was remembered*. According to this model, memories about Jesus were socially constructed, narrativized, and passed on, and these constructions, rather than the Jesus-qua-Jesus, are what we can access today. While there has been enthusiastic support for this approach from some corners of the academic world, there have also been more negative responses, ranging from strong critique to outright rejection.[12] Having

from the interpretations (*Jesus' Literacy*, 61).

10. I would contend that this is a subtle but important distinction. Whereas *response* is often more nuanced, *reaction* has a tendency to overcompensate, often in an attempt to say something new. For my part, I do not think Keith's response goes too far though I do think it is important for us to recognize that part of doing work that is perceived by our peers as "cutting-edge scholarship" carries with it the often unreasonable expectation that we say something genuinely "new," whatever that might mean.

11. See, for instance, Rafael Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance and Text* (Library of New Testament Studies 407; London: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2010); Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009); idem, *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). See also the book edited by Keith and Le Donne, which takes aim directly at the criteria of authenticity: *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

12. See, for example, Brian J. Wright's largely unsympathetic review of *Jesus against the Scribal Elite*; in particular the final paragraph (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57.4 [2014] 814–16). A more pointed comment about Keith's overall agenda is offered by Michael Thate (*Remembrance of Things Past? Albert Schweitzer, the Anxiety of Influence, and the Untidy Jesus of Markan Memory* [WUNT II/351; Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013], 17): "Though certainly promising on many counts, the purported post-criteria approach adopted here cannot escape the erotics of 'authenticity' or the gaze of the originary. This is a quest for the pure genre; the authentic genre; the *real* genre. As such, this amounts to little more than the criterion of authenticity in drag." See also Craig Blomberg's tepid review of *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise*

read some of these latter critiques, especially those from senior scholars who have been employing the criteria for decades, I am left wondering if certain objections to the social memory approach are more about attempts to preserve an academic legacy and less about a legitimate search for the most valuable conception of the historian's task. Perhaps it is neither charitable nor fruitful for me to express the matter in this way, but who doubts that our egos are inextricably bound up in what we research and write about? In making this point I am not absolving Chris Keith (or myself for that matter) of the desire to carve out an academic legacy, which is at least one reason why we must all balance our reverence or distaste for old arguments with our perennial desire to say something new.

UNINTENTIONAL ICONOCLASM

It is lamentable that the conclusions of sound scholarship rarely make their way down to the nonspecialist and when they do, they often lack the author's original nuance so as to be beyond recognition. For some nonspecialist readers this book will be about nothing more than why Jesus was unable to read and write—something many simply cannot abide. This is where Keith's thesis is unintentionally iconoclastic but still, I would contend, in a way that raises questions the nonspecialist, and especially the Christian nonspecialist, *must be made to think about*.

About eighteen years ago when I was beginning my graduate studies, I worked on a construction crew with a man of devout Catholic faith. He was aware of my area of study and engaged me on the topic of Jesus; in particular, he wanted to know what language Jesus spoke. When I responded that Jesus "most probably spoke Aramaic," the man was strangely pleased and displeased at the same time. His was a trick question, so he was unhappy with the content of my answer but thrilled with the opportunity he now had to correct and instruct me. He went on to inform me that Jesus was divine, and that as such he knew all languages of all time, including those that had yet to develop during his life on the earth. While Aramaic would have been his preferred language insofar as this would have allowed him to speak to his contemporaries, we should not attempt to place limitations on Jesus the divine Lord. As awkward and off-putting as this encounter was for me at the time, it ended up being a powerfully enlightening experience insofar as it reflected a pervasive attitude about Jesus that presently exists among Western Christians.

For those who approach discussions about Jesus with either an inability or an unwillingness to conceive of Jesus as a real person, the assertion that he was unable to read and write will be disconcerting indeed. From my own personal conversations

of Authenticity (http://www.denverseminary.edu/article/jesus-criteria-and-the-demise-of-authenticity/), and Craig Evans's review of the same book in *Evangelical Quarterly* 85.4 (2013) 364–66. For further critical engagement with Keith's work, see, most recently, Ernest van Eck, "Memory and Historical Jesus Studies: Formgeschichte in a New Dress?," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71.1 (2015) 1–10.

with Chris Keith over the past few years, I know that he has had far too many objections to his work from individuals with this mind-set, believing his to be a deeply troublesome portrait of Jesus. It does not surprise me that educated and privileged Christians living in the Western world cannot tolerate the concept of an illiterate Jesus. Much of the reaction against this idea is tied up in a matrix of issues that includes the judgment that educated people are inherently more valuable to society and to the world at large. Here it is also important to note that educated elite men have determined the formal development of Christian theology for two millennia. How can these servants of Christ be deemed more learned than the one they serve? Interestingly though, I have witnessed a similar reaction to this thesis among people from a very different demographic.

I currently live in North Carolina, where the public education system consistently ranks among the worst, least effective, and most underfunded in the United States. Further, I live in the eastern part of the state where there is a church on every corner and because agriculture is the dominant industry, a large portion of the population does not pursue formal education after high school. In short, this is a highly uneducated area in which most people would self-identify as "Christian." And even in this context I have found strong reactions to the idea that Jesus could not read or write. For Jesus to be their "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," he must know everything, which includes far more than but certainly does not preclude being formally educated. To state the matter more bluntly: even among uneducated people and those who do not appear outwardly to value formal education, there is still a high value placed upon a Jesus who could read and write. All of this leads me to wonder if Keith's contention that Jesus was not a scribal-literate teacher will ever truly earn a hearing among people of faith.

CONCLUSION

For now we are left with two problems that must be addressed whether we agree with Keith's assessment or not: (1) the Gospels do not agree on Jesus' literacy; and (2) form critical assumptions cannot get us back to the authentic Jesus. Some Jesus researchers may wish to dismiss Keith's argument as too radical of a break from the conventions of historical Jesus research. Some contemporary Christians may wish to label this as a "liberal" (or "skeptical," or "unbelieving") attempt to denigrate Jesus. However, neither of these responses actually engages with the substantive issues raised here. This book is a call to reenvision our understanding of Jesus and, in particular, the certainty that has attended our reflections about him, whether scholarly or devotional. So, in that light I ask those involved in Jesus research to hold loosely the "assured results of modern scholarship" that have emerged over the past century, and I beg those steeped in creedal Christianity to begin taking seriously the all-too-human existence of Jesus.