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Abstract

It is common for critics of the New Testament to cite William Harris' 10% literacy rate for first-century Greco-Romans as evidence for the implausibility of Jesus' followers to write, publish, and circulate the New Testament. This "evidence" is often used to dismiss the entire New Testament as a second-century fabrication that cannot accurately represent the true teachings of Jesus. Is this an accurate portrayal of Galilee during the time of Jesus? The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that Jesus' followers possessed the "Write' Stuff"—the ability to read, write, and memorize, as well as, access to the technology needed to produce and publish the New Testament.

Keywords

literacy, backgrounds, authorship, Gospels

Cover Page Footnote

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In recent discussions, critical scholarship has superimposed the educational and literary deficiencies of the Greco-Roman world onto Jesus and his followers as a means of denying the apostolic authorship and historical reliability of the Gospels. For example, in a debate with Michael Licona, Bart Ehrman argues that the followers of Jesus could not have written the Gospels based solely on the argument of generally low rates of literacy in the ancient world.¹ Much of this argument hinges on the literacy estimates and the work of scholars like William Harris (whose work will be discussed below) that ascribe a literacy rate at or below 10 percent to first-century Galilean Jews.² Critical scholarship deduces from the low literacy estimates in Galilee during the first century that Jesus and his followers did not have the capability of writing the Gospels.³ This project will attempt to demonstrate that it is reasonable to believe the followers of the Jesus movement had access to education, writing materials, and amanuenses capable enough to produce the Gospels.

Judean Literacy

When it comes to ancient literacy, the work of William Harris informs and shapes scholarly consensus.⁴ His work *Ancient Literacy* quantifies the standard benchmark for literacy within the Roman Empire at 10 percent.⁵ Among that 10 percent, he concludes that the literate population primarily consisted of the cultural elite and financially affluent inhabitants of large urban centers.⁶ In the case of Jesus and his followers, scholars assume their illiteracy based on their location well outside the urban center of Jerusalem, which they assume is the nearest location of formal education.⁷ This section will delve deeper into specific

¹ Bart Ehrman, “DEBATE: Bart Ehrman vs. Mike Licona (Are the Gospels Historically Reliable?)” Youtube.com, last modified February 21, 2018, <https://youtu.be/qP7RrCfDkO4>.

² William V. Harris. *Ancient Literacy*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 281-2.

³ W. H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Publishers, 1983), 17.

⁴ Ben Witherington III cites the work of H. Y. Gamble, who cites the work of W. V. Harris demonstrating the wide acceptance of Harris’ figures. See Ben Witherington III, “Education in the Greco-Roman World,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 188-194, H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 4, and Harris. *Ancient Literacy*, 272. Also, Wright discusses the influence of Harris’s work in the field of New Testament literacy, see Brian J. Wright, “Ancient Literacy in New Testament Research: Incorporating a Few More Lines of Inquiry,” *TRINJ* 36NS (2015), 161-189.

⁵ Harris. *Ancient Literacy*, 272.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-9.

⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Third Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 112.

aspects of first-century Jewish education that deviate from Harris *et al.*'s generalization concerning Jesus and his followers.

First, many Jews strictly followed their religious compulsion to provide the ability to read and write the *Torah* for their children. The *Torah* commands the Jewish family to obey, read, write, and teach the law to their children (Deut 6:1-9). Almost 2,000 years before the advent of Christ, Israelites were expected to be able to read and write *Torah* laws and to train their children to do the same. By the middle of the first century, Josephus documents Jewish families faithfully educating their children according to these *Torah* commands (*C. Ap.* 2.199-205). Even Harris acknowledges that the religious impulse for reading sacred writings is sufficient to induce an anomalous spike in literacy rates.⁸ It would be naïve to believe that every Jewish home had the diligence to observe the education of their children in the law so strictly, but it is reasonable to conclude that at least those who attended synagogue would find this responsibility compelling. Therefore, the religious culture and longstanding tradition of reading and writing God's law make it likely that first-century Jews in Galilee positively deviated from literacy norms.

Second, many synagogues operated as schools for teaching. This point is especially noteworthy, given that synagogues were the center of Jewish life for those living outside of Jerusalem. So, in the region of Galilee, where Jesus and his first disciples lived, devout Jews would have still had access to a synagogue and either a *sefer* or a *hazzan* for teaching children and adolescents reading and writing.⁹ Even rural synagogues in poorer areas would have a vested interest in teaching reading and writing to perpetuate the practice of *Torah* reading in their community. Likewise, whole scribal communities have been found outside of Jerusalem. Critical scholars largely claim that the literacy induced by the synagogue came only in response to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. While the collapse of worship in Jerusalem certainly attributed to a rise in literacy throughout the synagogues, other previous movements for literacy, Hebrew nationalism, and strict observance of the *Torah* were already well underway. For instance, in Qumran (home of the Dead Sea Scrolls), an apocalyptic scribal community existed that produced its documents, copied manuscripts, and exchanged scrolls with other communities beginning in the second century BCE. At about this same time, the Pharisaical movement began with the goal of stricter *Torah* observance. Both movements represent a historical dissatisfaction with the Temple in Jerusalem and its leadership—centuries before the destruction of the

⁸ Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 12. Curiously, Harris observes this point regarding modern literacy but avoids and dismisses it when it concerns first-century Jewish culture.

⁹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds...*, 112.

Temple.¹⁰ These examples serve to demonstrate that there were serious efforts among Jewish communities outside Jerusalem who were extremely concerned about the ability of their people to be able to read, write, and follow the *Torah*. These realities have led conservative scholars to conclude that “there was probably a higher degree of learning among a larger number of Jews than among any other people of the ancient world.”¹¹

Third, literacy was a common phenomenon among tradesmen and was necessary for common life. Wright points out that from the time before Christ, tradesmen within the Greco-Roman culture participated in voluntary associations connected with their craft and field of expertise.¹² Surviving documents from these associations demonstrate that the non-elite tradesmen of the empire obtained a level of literacy sufficient to record minutes of their meetings, make lists of donors, and even pen letters of resignation.¹³ Additionally, the empire was littered with monuments and inscriptions intended to be read by the average “passerby” and only make sense in a society where literacy is much more common than 10-15 percent.¹⁴ Another common feature of functional literacy is found in Greco-Roman graffiti. Graffiti is well-established in the Roman world, but it is also found in Palestine.¹⁵ Additionally, Palestinian documents recovered from the time of the authorship of the Gospels contain property deeds, marriage and divorce contracts, and debt records.¹⁶

To insist that Jesus’ followers could read and write is not intended to dismiss the work of scholars like Harris, who has done much to help scholars understand the rate of literacy among ancient civilizations like the Greeks and Romans. However, statistical averages do not always apply equally to all members of a group. In the case of the Jewish people, they possessed the religious motivation and commitment to make literacy a priority in their communities. As a result, though they are among the people for whom (on average) only 10 percent were literate, they are likely anomalous outliers that do not conform to the normal statistical application.

¹⁰ Nicholas Perrin, “Exile” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 33-4.

¹¹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds...*, 112. Brian J. Wright, “Communal Reading and Literacy in Ancient Everyday Life,” *Inscriptions, Graffiti, and Documentary Papyri, vol. 10*, in *Ancient Literature for New Testament Studies*; eds. James R. Harrison and E. Randolph Richards (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, Forthcoming).

¹² Wright, “Ancient Literacy...,” 175-9.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 176-7.

¹⁵ Alan R. Millard, “Literacy in the Time of Jesus,” *BAR* 29/4 Jul-Aug, 2003, 37.

¹⁶ Ibid., 37-8.

Writing Technology

By the first century CE, writing was not only common within the Greco-Roman world, but it was also the communicative lifeblood of the empire. Papyrus paper was a major export from Egypt, which provided a practical (but costly) form of documentation. A less expensive and innovative alternative for writing was the wax tablet. The tablet was inexpensive to make—requiring only a thin wooden board, a stylus, and a coating of wax.¹⁷ The most durable and costly writing option was parchment—which was reserved for the most important documents. Major documentation usually took the form of a scroll, but tablets could also be used officially if closed and sealed, and papyrus and parchment sheets could be bound into a book or codex.

The question for the plausibility of Jesus' followers being able to produce the Gospels is this: Did they have access to the available writing technology necessary to document the life of Jesus and produce documents like the Gospels? First, Jesus' followers would have had access to papyri and parchment. Papyrus was a major Egyptian export and the common "paper" of the era. Additionally, many Jews were living in Alexandria, so it is reasonable to believe that Jews in Palestine would be familiar with the material through their interaction with Greeks, Romans, and Jews returning from abroad.

Second, would the disciples and followers of Jesus know about and have access to wax tablets? Wax tablets were a cheap and reusable writing medium that could function as the document itself or simply be used to take notes which could be sorted and collated later onto a durable, permanent surface like papyrus or parchment. Tablets were known to be used regularly throughout the empire, so their presence in occupied Palestine appears inevitable.¹⁸ The fact that they were regularly used by tradesmen for accounts and financial records make it likely that tax collectors, like Matthew, and fishermen, like Peter and Andrew, would have been familiar with and even used this type of resource. Additionally, recent evidence suggests that it is likely that followers of Jesus may have taken notes on his teaching and utilized them later.¹⁹ This type of activity pairs well with wax tablet usage.

It has been demonstrated that Jesus' disciples would have had access to the basic tools necessary for producing the Gospels: tablets, papyrus, and

¹⁷ Loveday Alexander, "Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 72-3.

¹⁸ Ibid. additionally, Millard points out that a wax tablet was found among the Bar-Kokhba manuscripts, placing their use in Palestine during the life of Jesus, Millard, "*Literacy in the Time of Jesus*," 42.

¹⁹ Wright, "Ancient Literacy," 181, and Millard, "*Literacy in the Time of Jesus*," 44.

parchment. Though parchment could be very expensive, the other two choices, tablets and papyrus, were not necessarily out of the reach of the disciples. Among the followers of the early church, there were people of means who could have reasonably supplied the materials for the creation of these documents. Even in more modest Christian communities where no affluent member existed, the devotion of the followers would have been significant enough to pool resources for this important task.

The Literacy of Jesus

An important aspect of determining the literacy of Jesus' earliest followers is the literacy of Jesus himself. Several questions emerge as Jesus' literacy is considered, such as, did Jesus have access to reading or writing instruction? Would Jesus have intentionally selected disciples from among the literate for the purpose of recording his teachings? Would Jesus have taught and required his closest disciples to read and write? Each of these issues touching on the education of Jesus will be addressed below:

First, to what degree did Jesus have access to education, and what would that educational opportunity have looked like? It is generally assumed that education was only available to Jewish people who resided in Jerusalem and that few, if any, opportunities existed for those who lived in urban areas like Nazareth. It has already been demonstrated that local synagogues were known to have a room and a teacher for instruction on how to read the *Torah*. Also, communities like Qumran existed in remote areas where an actual scribal community developed. Based on the Gospel texts, it is obvious that Jesus attained a remarkable degree of learning at an early age (Luke 2:42-52). He was able to read the *Torah* and teach in the synagogues (Mark 1:39; Luke 4:16-21). As Casey points out, Jesus was not only able to read in Hebrew, but he also had command of the *Torah* well enough to formally debate and confound the most educated scribes and religious leaders in Israel (Matt 21:23-23:39).²⁰

But the question remains, how could Jesus have received his education? As the oldest child in the family, Stein points out that he would have been the most likely of the children to receive a formal education.²¹ Nazareth's proximity to Sepphoris (6 kilometers) makes it a place where Joseph, Jesus, and his brothers traveled for work and, possibly, for formal education.²² If the cost of education was an issue, the extravagant gifts given by the wise men a few years prior could

²⁰ Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching*. (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 170.

²¹ Robert H. Stein, *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1996), 57.

²² Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*...163.

have negated this expense (Matt 2:11). Additionally, given the level of giftedness evidenced by his discussions with the teachers in Jerusalem, it is not unreasonable to believe that qualified teachers would have found a way to educate a prodigious child for a lesser fee. Granted, much of this is circumstantial speculation, but it is also plausible and reasonable to believe based on historical and textual evidence. Jesus came from a family that went to synagogue weekly, Passover yearly, and had extended family members in the priesthood who could read and write (Luke 4:16; 2:41; 1:59-63). If they had relatives who could read and write, then Jesus likely had access to basic literacy in the home, or at least within reasonable proximity of the home. If they had weekly access to the synagogue, then they likely had access to a *sofer*. Given his intellectual capabilities, any education he was exposed to would have taken root and grown even without further formal training. But given the pious family he was from, his natural intellect, and his proximity to educational resources through the synagogue and family, it is reasonable to take the record of the text that Jesus could read and write (John 8:1-11).²³

Secondly, is it possible that Jesus selected at least a portion of his disciples because they had the useful skill of reading and writing? The biblical text indicates that Jesus was selective in who was allowed to follow his ministry while others were not permitted (Mark 5:18-20). Perhaps literacy was one of these factors he considered for his permanent disciples? Perhaps this is why the man healed of demonic possession in Mark was asked to stay behind and share Jesus' message? Among Jesus' disciples, the most likely candidate for literacy is Matthew. More will be said below, but Matthew's occupation as a tax collector for the Roman government and the recordkeeping incumbent upon him undoubtedly implies his ability to read and write at a very high level (Matt 9:9; 10:3).

Third, would Jesus have required his disciples to memorize and even record his teachings? Millard notes that there is a precedent for Jewish rabbis to "allow for written notes of a teacher's words to be kept on tablets."²⁴ The wax tablet is a device known to the time of Jesus, used by Roman officials (like tax collectors), and relatively inexpensive to make or purchase. Additionally, Chang posited that Jesus (like all Rabbis) required his disciples to memorize his teachings.²⁵ It is also possible that Jesus required his disciples to memorize "his

²³ It is noted that the earliest manuscripts do not include this passage and that has caused scholars to shy away from its usage. I believe that the passage is part of Scripture and therefore feel the freedom and liberty to utilize it for this purpose. But in case someone else does not hold to its veracity, my argument is not built on the acceptance of this passage. Rather, my argument gets there another way.

²⁴ Millard, "Literacy in the Time of Jesus," 44.

²⁵ Kai-Hsuan Chang, "Questioning the Feasibility of the Major Synoptic Hypotheses: Scribal Memory as the Key to the Oral-Written Interface," *Journal for the Study of the New*

message” before authorizing them to go out and “proclaim the good news” (Luke 10:1-24; Mark 6:1-13; Matt 10:1-11:1). Having disciples who can read and write makes it easier for the disciples to memorize their Rabbi’s teachings. Mare finds a similar note-taking capacity within Jesus’ ministry and concludes that “Christ had his disciples on whom he so impressed his message and deeds that they took them to heart and quickly wrote them down that they might be passed on to others (Luke 1:1-4; 2 Tim. 2:2) ...As Paul had his amanuenses, so Christ had in his group of apostolic followers.”²⁶

Not only could Jesus read and write, but he also had close associates and disciples who could read and write. At a minimum, all his close disciples would have needed to precisely memorize his teachings. Jesus’ relationship with his followers would have mirrored that of other rabbi-disciple relationships, which included the ability to read and record the teachings of the rabbi.

The Literacy of the Gospel Authors

Obviously, the Gospels have had authors since they exist and have been known to exist from the middle to late first century. Current Christian scholarship is divided over who wrote them and when they were authored. For the sake of this discussion, the author holds to the presupposition that the Gospels are authentic first-century documents written by the authors to whom they were attributed in the early history of the Christian Church, that is, Matthew the Tax-Collector, John Mark, Luke the Physician, and John the Beloved.²⁷ Matthew is described in some detail above, but to further strengthen the case for him, he had the requisite language and literacy skills to write his Gospel. As a tax collector, he was likely able to converse three or four regional languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. Additionally, he would have been a wealthy man and could have readily sourced writing materials for early Christian documents. He is also a likely candidate for Mare’s amanuensis among Jesus’ disciples.

Testament 41/4 (2019): 409. Interestingly, Chang notes that Mark is structured in such a manner that it may be easily memorized, 412. If Peter lacked the sophistication to author Mark, then this could explain how Peter operates as the source for Mark. Peter would have been taught how to memorize the teachings and events of Jesus while with Jesus. Then, at some point, he communicated these pericopes to Mark who recorded them and later assembled them into the Gospel attributed to him.

²⁶ W. Harold Mare, “The Role of the Note-Taking Historian and His Emphasis on the Person and Work of Christ,” *JETS* 15/2 (1972): 121.

²⁷ In my opinion, there is little warrant for distrusting the early church fathers’ accounts of who authored the Gospels. They are closer in time, culture, and geography to the original documents and sources and are likely much more capable of finding the sources and documentation for arriving at authorship. Additionally, the nature of this discussion is to address whether or not the early follower of Jesus had the literacy and means to produce the Gospels.

John Mark is also a very interesting writing candidate. Church tradition holds that John Mark recorded material given to him by Peter and formed the Gospel that now bears his name (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15-16). According to Acts, John Mark is from a wealthy family who was also very close to the ministry of Peter and worked with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:12-13; 15:36-41). That Mark's family had some means is implied in his mother's reputation for having a home large enough to accommodate a large group of believers and the presence of a servant, Rhoda (Acts 12:12-13). His affluence and presence in Jerusalem easily place him into the category of those likely to be literate in both reading and writing.

Luke epitomizes the careful New Testament author. He outlines his methodology and purpose: to consult with eyewitnesses and bring their accounts of the life of Christ into an "orderly account" so that the life and message of Jesus are known with "certainty" (Luke 1:1-4). According to Irenaeus, Luke was a physician and follower of Paul who used the apostle as the source for his Gospel and Acts (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.6). Luke, likely a Gentile Christian or Hellenized Jewish Christian, had the educational background and means to read, write, and produce Christian literature.

John the Beloved was in Jesus' inner circle and produced his Gospel later than the others. According to church tradition, there is a strong testimony to John producing the Gospel attributed to him (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.1-3). Given the lateness of John's New Testament writings and his significant age at the time, it is likely that he utilized an amanuensis like that of Peter and Paul. As mentioned before about the disciples of Jesus, he could also likely read, write, or at the least recall facts committed to formal memory during the ministry of Jesus.

Overall, there are plausible reasons to believe that the traditional authors of the Gospels are the actual authors of the Gospels. Church tradition clearly states that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John produced the Gospels that bear their names today. In contrast, critical scholarship downplays this early tradition and adopts the view of the disciples as illiterates who could not have produced any literature of value. As stated before, this position is an exaggeration and misapplication of a generalized view of Greco-Roman literacy. When the historical sources are examined more closely, Jewish literacy, at this time, is much higher than in other cultures, and Jesus' core disciples were not a random accumulation of Jewish men. Instead, Jesus selected some and not others for this special service, and it appears that part of the criteria was an inclination toward verbal memory and functional literacy.

The Literacy of Other Followers

Not only did the twelve disciples as a group and the four authors of the Gospels meet reasonable requirements for literacy, but there were also early believers around the Jesus movement who were likely literate enough to assist with scribal tasks on behalf of those producing Christian literature. First, there were Jewish religious leaders in the early church. For instance, both Nicodemus (John 3) and Joseph of Arimathea (Matt 27:57-60) meet literacy protocols. Secondly, those converted to Christianity by Peter’s preaching at Pentecost likely contained wealthy and literate Jews. From the fact that they were able to travel to Jerusalem from places like Rome and Alexandria, it may be inferred that some were wealthy and educated. For example, the Ethiopian Eunuch was in possession of an Isaiah scroll and reading it (Acts 8:26-38). Additionally, Jews in Alexandria were so literate and educated in the Greek language that some scholars theorize it as the origin of *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.²⁸ Many Alexandrian Jews were likely in attendance to hear Peter at Pentecost. Finally, among the many members of the early church were Roman military leaders and slaves (Acts 10:1-33). Roman centurions would have been literate and would have had access to writing materials. Additionally, many slaves were literate and scribal and performed such functions as a part of their daily life. Paul was known to make use of these secretarial servants.²⁹

Conclusion

After closer examination of the reasonable evidence available, it is plausible to believe that Jesus, some of his disciples, and some of the earliest followers of the Jesus movement were literate enough to write the Gospels. Additionally, they had reasonable access to the tablets, papyri, and parchments necessary to produce the Gospels. Even if it is conceded that Jesus and his followers could read but not compose literature, there is still an abundance of evidence that they would have had access to others who were more than capable of taking their memorized tradition and compiling it into literature useful to the early church.

²⁸ Jonah Bissell, “School Buildings in Mediterranean Antiquity: Notes on the Provenance of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 43(3) (2021): 303-320.

²⁹ Greg Stanton, “Accommodation for Paul’s Entourage,” *Novum Testamentum* 60 (2018): 227-231.

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