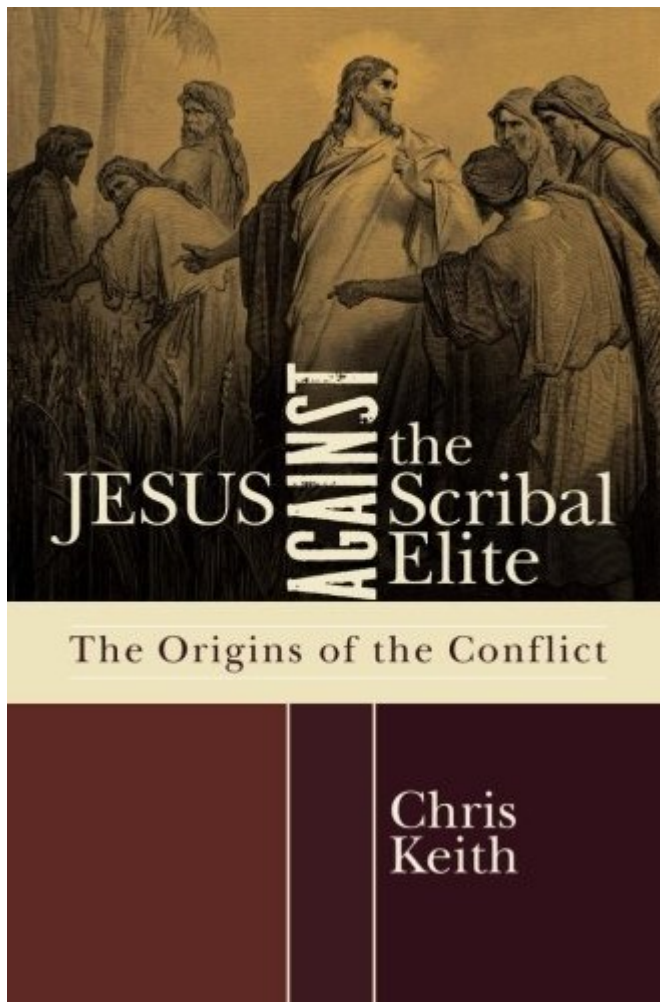


Jesus against the Scribal Elite, by Chris Keith

reviewed by [Greg Carey](#) in the [December 10, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Jesus against the Scribal Elite

By Chris Keith
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Chris Keith sets out to answer two questions. Most basically: What lay at the heart of the conflict that led some religious authorities, the “scribal elite,” to seek and win Jesus’ death? In Keith’s estimation the explanation leads to a second matter: Was

Jesus literate, and how did he relate to Israel's scriptures? Keith maintains that Jesus did not possess anything like scribal literacy but that early Christian memory tended to enhance Jesus' literacy as time progressed. Jesus' status as an authoritative teacher, especially as an interpreter of scripture, lies at the heart of the conflict that led to his death. Other factors, such as the nature of Jesus' teaching, his relationship to messianic expectation, and his reputation as a wonder worker, would have been secondary.

Keith writes with the charm of an excellent classroom teacher: always clear, occasionally hip, and sometimes a little geeky. Any reader who has completed a basic curriculum in the Gospels will enjoy this book, while professional scholars will recognize immediately that Keith is a primary contributor to academic debates. He has earned a reputation as an influential emerging voice in historical Jesus research and an expert on ancient literacy.

Keith's basic argument comes down to two elements. First, Jesus was not a scribal-literate teacher, but some of his contemporaries believed he was. Second, these split perceptions led to conflict between Jesus and the scribal elites. Jesus provided compelling interpretations of scripture, but the elites assumed that only highly literate persons were qualified to offer such teaching. When the scribal elites sought to expose Jesus as a pretender who lacked the credentials to read and interpret the Law, Jesus fought back and occasionally won the struggle for public esteem. The elites' attempts to embarrass Jesus amounted to an attempt "to put out a fire with gasoline."

Keith's argument is straightforward. He explains that public teachers were expected to possess scribal competence, a rare quality in the ancient world. Contrary to widespread assumption, ordinary Jews did not acquire literacy through synagogue education. In a brilliant survey of the synoptic Gospels, Keith demonstrates a progression: where Mark presents an illiterate Jesus who does not succeed as a synagogue teacher, Matthew's Jesus knows the Torah intimately, and Luke's Jesus possesses scribal expertise. Keith argues that it is far more likely that Christians enhanced Jesus' education as time passed than that they diminished it. Early Christianity's ancient critics charged that the movement was composed of ignorant, low-status people, and the move toward a literate Jesus aimed to blunt that critique.

Then Keith gets to the heart of the matter. Jesus spoke in public, particularly interpreting scripture in synagogues and challenging the interpretations of his

opponents. Therefore some observers naturally assumed he was literate. His conflict with various scribal groups tended to revolve around his authority to interpret scripture—particularly because he lacked the ability to read the relevant texts.

This book includes several examples of remarkably insightful biblical interpretation, particularly when Keith examines the distinctive ways in which each Gospel treats Jesus' relationship to literacy. One outstandingly presented case involves Mark's "layered portrayal" of Jesus as a synagogue teacher in diverse contexts. Mark contrasts Jesus' teaching with those of the "scribal-elite teachers," combining Jesus' teaching with his powerful deeds: "Where an audience is willing to allow Jesus' exorcisms and healings to influence their view of his identity, he is accepted as a *synagogue* teacher," but where the audience does not link Jesus' deeds to his teachings, they reject him. Indeed, after the account of Jesus' difficult visit to the Nazareth synagogue, Mark never again describes Jesus teaching in a synagogue. Thus "Mark portrays Jesus as a compelling teacher whose contemporaries did not expect him to be a synagogue teacher because he was a member of the manual-labor class." Keith then goes on to show how Matthew and Luke subtly and not so subtly revised Mark's version of the story to enhance Jesus' teaching authority (Matthew) and his literacy (Luke).

No one in Jesus' world talked about a group of scribal elites as Keith does, and Keith doesn't discriminate among the elites and their potentially diverse relationships to Jesus. He is more interested in tracing the most fundamental motive for their resistance to him. But readers will wonder: How did Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, priests, and others relate to one another, and how did each group relate to Jesus? Did all these groups enjoy elite status?

The Gospel narratives provide two different impressions regarding the controversies between Jesus and other authorities. To a historian's eye it seems largely plausible that throughout his ministry in Galilee and elsewhere Jesus engaged in debates with the Pharisees and their allies. We could pour over details concerning the extent of the debates and the identity of the Herodians and the scribes, but there's no reason to doubt that Jesus received, responded to, and perhaps initiated criticism.

On the other hand, in Jerusalem Jesus debated a wide variety of opponents. This impression clearly reflects Mark's own creative literary activity and its influence on Matthew and Luke. Mark narrates a series of Jerusalem controversies that involved Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, priests, and others that escalated to the point that

Jesus' opponents plotted his death. But Keith investigates neither the identities of these opponents nor their motives for resisting him.

How did a conflict over authority escalate to the point at which some scribal elites sought and won Jesus' death? Keith acknowledges that factors such as Jesus' healings and exorcisms, along with perceptions of Jesus as Messiah or Son of God, would have also exacerbated tensions. To his credit, Keith understands that conflicts over the authority to teach probably do not explain why scribal elites sought his death. Oddly, he does not mention the possibility that Jesus directly antagonized the Jerusalem authorities, who would have had very different reasons for opposing Jesus than did the Pharisees. I would love to see Keith take on that question in a future project. What did Jesus do to get himself killed?