

Chris Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus* (New Testament Tools, Studies, and Documents 38; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009). Pp. xvi + 350. Hardback €121.00/\$166.00. ISBN 978-90-04-17394-1.

- [1] When it comes to textual variants within the New Testament, perhaps no passage has received more attention than John 7:53-8:11, the *Pericope Adulterae* (PA). Generations of scholars have offered countless hypotheses regarding its origins, its proper interpretation, and the history of its textual transmission. Thus, one might wonder whether we really need another piece of scholarship on this well-worn passage. However, Chris Keith's recent volume—originally written as his doctoral thesis under Larry Hurtado at the University of Edinburgh—is a refreshing reminder that new discoveries are possible for those willing to mine more deeply into early Christian texts. Taking a cue from a brief comment from Edgar Goodspeed about the purpose of the PA, Keith makes a twofold argument: (a) the PA is best understood as making a claim that Jesus was “grapho-literate” (i.e., he could write) in the face of challenges from the Pharisees in John 7:15 (cf. 7:52) that he was illiterate; and (b) the PA was inserted into the Johannine textual tradition in the third century in order to respond to pagan challenges that Christians (and their founder) were illiterate and uneducated. Keith has produced a most worth-while volume that will be a benefit not only to those in textual criticism, but also those more broadly in the field of New Testament studies and early Christian history.
- [2] In chapter one, Keith begins his study in the traditional place, namely with a review of prior literature on the subject. However, instead of reviewing all types of research on the PA, he specifically addresses how prior scholars have understood Jesus' act of writing on the ground in 8:6 and 8:8. After a helpful overview of 38 other suggestions, Keith argues that prior scholarship has wrongly focused on *what* Jesus wrote—something the text definitively (and intentionally) does not provide. Instead, he argues, the PA is simply making the claim *that* Jesus wrote; i.e., that he is grapho-literate. This is particularly noteworthy given that the PA “constitutes the sole claim within the canonical or non-canonical Jesus tradition that Jesus could write” (25).
- [3] After arguing in chapter two that the verbs γράφω and καταγράφω in John 8:6,8 are actually referring to writing (as opposed to just drawing or doodling), Keith uses chapters three and four to deal with the overall issue of literacy in the broader Greco-Roman world as well as the role it played in first century Palestine. These chapters provide a helpful overview of the complex issues associated with literacy in the ancient world and Keith is careful to draw distinctions between certain levels of literacy and the difference between the skills of reading a text and writing/composing a text. In regard to the latter, he argues that such a skill played a vital role in establishing the scribes/Pharisees as “text-brokers” in the ancient world—they had power and influence because they were the channel or intermediary by which people would access the scriptures. It is precisely this context, argues Keith, that made the claims of the PA so pertinent. The PA served to challenge the scribes/Pharisees by highlighting the fact that Jesus was also a capable “text-broker” who should be regarded as an equally authoritative (if not superior) guide to the scriptures.
- [4] Beginning in chapter five, Keith starts the transition to the issue of the textual history of the PA. After providing a convincing demonstration that the PA was originally located in 7:53-8:11 (despite its appearance in other locations), he argues in chapters six, seven, and eight that the PA fits ideally with the theological and practical concerns of John's gospel (particularly John 7). In other words, the PA's interpolator must have been a careful reader of John's gospel

and intended the story to be read precisely in this location. Particularly interesting is Keith's discussion in chapter eight of the dual mention of Jesus writing in 8:6 and 8:8. Here he draws parallels to the text of Ex 32:15 (LXX) and 31:18 (LXX) where there is discussion of God writing the tablets of the Decalogue in his own "finger." Based on these connections, Keith concludes, "The interpolator portrays Jesus not as a copier of the Torah who has internalized God's laws in the process of writing them, *but rather as the author of the Decalogue, from whom the laws derive in the first place*" (189, emphasis his). Thus, Keith rightly recognizes that "John 8:6-8 evinces a high Christology indeed" (190).

- [5] In the final chapter, Keith draws all these strands together to make an argument for *why* the PA was inserted into the Johannine textual tradition in the third century. He declares, "I will suggest that the context for PA's insertion into GJohn is that of second- and third-century Christian responses to pagan criticisms of Christian literacy" (203). Here Keith provides an overview of how early Christians were perceived as illiterate by their pagan opponents and the steps they took to mitigate that perception. He covers a lot of ground—patristic testimony, apocryphal literature, and even iconographic representations—and makes a compelling case that this context would have played a decisive role for the inclusion of the PA in John's gospel. By doing so, Keith's name can be added to a growing list of other scholars who have sought to trace textual changes to the social and theological contexts of early Christian scribes (e.g., Epp, Ehrman, Parsons, Head, Witherington, Kannaday, Hanes-Eitzen, etc.). From this perspective, textual additions, like the PA, are not to be discarded as scraps on the cutting room floor, but are to be viewed as "windows" into the complex challenges faced by early Christians and the ways scribes may have modified the text to address those challenges.
- [6] Overall, Keith's volume is an excellent contribution to the study of the PA and no doubt will alter the direction of future research on this passage. It intersects with a number of different disciplines—theology, exegesis, patristics, and textual criticism—making it a welcome volume for all in New Testament studies. However, there are two minor areas of concern that I will make brief mention of here. The first is a weakness of the study that Keith himself acknowledges. Although he makes a compelling case that the issue of Christian literacy was a pressing one within early Christianity, he acknowledges that none of the early patristic writers "cite PA specifically in support of the idea that Jesus was literate" (250). In other words, even though the PA was supposedly inserted into the textual tradition in order to combat perceptions about Christian illiteracy, we have no evidence that it ever actually *functioned* this way amongst early Christian writers. Although Keith is correct that this "does not disprove the hypothesis" (250)—I think his hypothesis is largely correct—it is an area of weakness that could have been given more attention than it received. Although we must carefully distinguish between the scribe's *intention* in making a textual change and the actual *impact* of that textual change (and the two are clearly not the same), we must still wrestle with the difficult question of why this particular scribal change proved to be so unsuccessful (at least as measured by the extant patristic evidence).
- [7] Second, Keith uses the story of the PA as a basis for drawing broader conclusions about how independent oral/written traditions affected the transmission of the New Testament text in the earliest centuries of Christianity. He states, "PA is thus primary evidence that long-held assumptions that written tradition was 'fixed' while oral tradition was 'free' are incorrect" (259). However, this conclusion may have benefited from some more nuance. Certainly all textual critics are aware that some NT manuscripts exhibit a more "fluid" text during this time period—in this sense the text was certainly not "fixed." However, *large-scale* changes like

the PA are decidedly rare. Indeed, the PA constitutes the only known instance of a large-scale absorption of an independent story into the New Testament textual tradition (Keith rightly acknowledges that the Long Ending of Mark is more of a composite ending pulled from the other three canonical gospels; cf. Kelhoffer). If so, then one is hard pressed to use the PA as an example that was *characteristic* of the transmission of gospel tradition in the early centuries. If such large-scale changes happened more frequently we certainly are not aware of them.

- [8] These notations aside, Keith's volume is an excellent resource for New Testament scholars. Not only does it make an impressive (and convincing) contribution to our understanding of the PA, but it illumines other important areas of early Christianity along the way.

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