

Was Jesus Illiterate?

Introduction.

- I. This lesson will examine the question, "Was Jesus illiterate?"
 - A. This is a surprising and shocking question to believers.
 - B. We cannot even imagine that this question would be raised about Jesus even by those who did not believe in Him.
 - C. We are use to some denying His Deity and even His existence or humanity, but not His literacy.
 - D. **In the thinking of believers it is ridiculous to suggest that the Son of God could not read or write.**
- II. The attacks on Jesus seem to be endless, and one of the attacks made on Him was that He was illiterate.
 - A. It is charged Jesus was an ignorant Galilean.
 - B. It is charged Jesus had perhaps memorized some scriptures, and deluded the people about His literacy and His identity.
- III. The charge is based on several arguments.
 - A. It is affirmed that 95% of the people in Jesus' day could not read or write, so the odds are that He could not read or write.
 - B. Jesus did not write anything Himself, so He must have been illiterate.
 1. We have no writings of Jesus.
 2. This does not prove He could not write or He never wrote anything.
 - C.. Some contend the New Testament itself shows Jesus was illiterate.
 1. This will be concluded by direct statements.
 2. It will also be concluded by deductive reasoning.

I. Arguments For Illiteracy Examined

- A. **Argument #1** - It is true that most people could not read or write in the time of Christ.
 1. 95% is likely an exaggeration.
 2. The number was more like 80 to 90% which is still high. The fact that most could not read or write does not mean or imply that there was not a lot of writing during this period of time.

3. These statistics do not prove anything within themselves about the literacy of Jesus.
4. One could use this same argument to prove that none of the apostles could read or write.
 - a. Of course, many do argue that the apostles were ignorant, illiterate fisherman from Galilee. (The apostles wrote much of the N.T. - Matthew, John, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1,2,3 John, Revelation).
 - b. Many do accept that Paul was an educated man.

ACT 5:34 But a certain **Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law**, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time.

ACT 22:3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, **educated under Gamaliel**, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, just as you all are today.

Note:

- Gamaliel was a renowned teacher of the law, and a Pharisee.
- Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel, a teacher of Paul (Acts 22:3). He was later president of the Sanhedrin, and the first of the seven rabbis termed Rabban.
- Paul had one of the finest educations available in his time.

B. Argument #2

1. The Bible declares this in John 7:15.

JOH 7:15 The Jews therefore were marveling, saying, "How has this man become learned [lit knew letters], having never been educated?" NASB

JOH 7:15 "How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?"

Lit. "How this man letters knows not having learned?"

- a. "Letters" is the Greek "gramma" and refers to any writings – letters, notes, scriptures, or even bills of sale. (Lk. 16:6).

LUK 16:6 "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill [gramma], and sit down quickly and write fifty.'

It is used to refer to the Jewish scriptures. (2 Tim. 3:15).

- 1) The words "become learned" are significant.
- 2) The Jews recognized He had "become learned" apart from their special schools, and they were puzzled about it.

- b. In John 5:47 it [gramma] is used to refer to the writings of Moses.. "If ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" ASV

2. The meaning of John 7:15 is that Jesus never had formal training in the Scriptures.

a. The context of the response is to Jesus' ability to expound the Scriptures - not to His ability to read them. He had not been privileged to attend their special schools. He had not sat at their feet.

b. Jesus responded to this question by affirming His teaching was from God. (Jn. 7:16).

JOH 7:16 Jesus therefore answered them, and said, "My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me.

c. He did not understand it (their words) as a challenge to His ability to read or write.

3. The Jews recognized that Jesus knew "letters."

4. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus read. (Lk. 4:16-21).

First Rejection At Nazareth

LUK 4:16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and **stood up to read**. "read" is from "anagin~~o~~sko."

LUK 4:17 And the book [scroll] of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book [scroll], and **found** the place where it was written,

LUK 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are downtrodden,

LUK 4:19 To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord. "

LUK 4:20 And He closed [rolled u] the book [scroll], and gave it back to the attendant, and **sat down**; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him.

LUK 4:21 And He began to say to them, "**Today** this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

- Jesus was likely invited to read and comment on some passage in Isaiah by the ruler of the Synagogue..
- Luke states "the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him" which suggests He was invited to read.
- Jesus deliberately chose to read Isaiah 61:1,2.
- He unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and found Isaiah 61:2 which would be near impossible without being able to read.
- He stood and read the scripture and then rolled up the scroll and sat down to teach.
- It was the custom to stand to read the scriptures and then sit down to give the exposition of it. (Matt. 23:2; 26:55). There were exceptions to this. (Acts 13:15,16).
- "The eyes of all in the Synagogue were fixed upon Him" anticipating His comments.

a. Jesus **read** from Isaiah 61:1,2.

ISA 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, Because the Lord has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives, And freedom to prisoners;

ISA 61:2 To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn,

b. "The Spirit of the Lord" came upon Jesus at His baptism. (Matt. 3:16; Lk. 3:22; Jn.1:32-34; Acts 10:38).

<p>MAT 3:16 And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him,</p>	<p>LUK 3:22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, "Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well-pleased."</p>	<p>JOH 1:32 And John bore witness saying, "I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. JOH 1:33 "And I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' JOH 1:34 "And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."</p>	<p>ACT 10:38 "You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him.</p>
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- c. This gave Jesus the power to do all kinds of miracles, and to preach the gospel (the message of God).
- d. His anointing by the Holy Spirit was prophetic and messianic. (Lk. 4:24; 3:22; Acts 4:26,27; 10:38). Jesus was a Prophet and the Messiah and the Son of God.
- e. "Today" does not denote that literal day, but the Messianic Age. The Messiah had come to the world, and was in their midst.

Note:

- One who was illiterate would not have been able to open the scroll of Isaiah, and find the prophecy He read in the Synagogue. The scroll was likely the entire volume of Isaiah which has some 66 chapters.
- "And He opened the book [scroll], and found the place where it was written."
- His home town folks would have known if Jesus was not able to read.
- They were acquainted with His background and recognized He was Joseph's son.
- They rejected Jesus, but not His ability to read. (Lk. 4:22-28).

LUK 4:22 And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

LUK 4:23 And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your home town as well.'"

LUK 4:24 And He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his home town.

LUK 4:25 "But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land;

LUK 4:26 and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.

LUK 4:27 "And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

LUK 4:28 **And all in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things;**

5. The Bible teaches Jesus wrote. (Jn. 8:8).

JOH 8:8 And again He stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

a. The words “wrote” or “it has been written” are used to describe typical writing. (Jn. 8:17).

JOH 8:17 "Even in your law it has been written, that the testimony of two men is true.

b. The word can mean “engraving,” but this is not its typical usage.

c. We have no idea what Jesus wrote, and it is vain to speculate.

d. It may have been some scripture, but we cannot be sure.

7. There are times where Jesus used the expression, “**Have you not read?**” (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31).

a. This kind of challenge is unthinkable if He could not read.

b. His enemies would have quickly pointed out that He could neither read or write if that had been the case.

c. He would then have been scorned by the leaders and the people.

d. They were puzzled by what He taught and did and His wisdom because He was a carpenter’s son.

Second Rejection At Nazareth

MAR 6:1 And He went out from there, and He came into His home town; and His disciples followed Him.

MAR 6:2 And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "**Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands?**"

MAR 6:3 "**Is not this the carpenter**, the son of Mary, and brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him.

C. **Argument #3** - See Introduction III. C.

1. There is nothing in the New Testament that suggests that Jesus could not read or write.

2. This is an argument of generalization that since most others could not read or write that Jesus could not read or write.

3. This generalization ignores the scriptures that affirm or suggest that Jesus could read and write.

4. It is an argument based on silence, and a desire to demean Jesus.

II. Here Are Some Facts That We Should Also Keep In Mind.

A. Those who maintain Jesus could not read ignore the fact that He was not a mere man, but was the Son of God. (Matt. 16:16, 17; Jn. 20:30, 31).

B. They ignore the outstanding ability that Jesus manifested at an early age. (Lk. 2:41-47).

LUK 2:41 And His parents used to go to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.

LUK 2:42 And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast;

LUK 2:43 and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. And His parents were unaware of it,

LUK 2:44 but supposed Him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances.

LUK 2:45 And when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, looking for Him.

LUK 2:46 And it came about that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them, and asking them questions.

LUK 2:47 And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers.

1. This passage does not prove Jesus could read or write.
2. It does reveal that Jesus was an exceptional youth that impressed even the teachers of the law.
3. It is hard to imagine how an illiterate boy could have impressed these educated men.

C. They ignore the fact that Jesus had the Holy Spirit without measure. (Jn. 3:34, 35).

1. Jesus could do all kinds of miracles.
2. One who could do all kinds of miracles could surely read and write.

D. These attacks on Jesus nearly always come from those who deny the Divine nature of Christ.

1. They seek in every way to demean and destroy Him.
2. If one way does not work, they seek another.

E. Indications of Jesus' literacy may also be seen with **His familiarity with scriptures**.

1. Jesus alluded to or quotes frequently from the Old Testament.
2. He made reference to the books of Law, the psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekial, and to many other books of the Old Testament.
3. Jesus demonstrated a knowledge of scripture that cannot be explained if one assumes He was an ignorant man who could not read.
 - a. He defeated Satan with His knowledge of scriptures. (Matt. 4:4,7,10). See Deut. 8:3; 6:16,13.
 - b. He quickly explained the ministry of John the Baptist by quoting from the prophet Malachi. (Matt. 11:10; Mal. 3:1).
 - c. He explained God's requirement of mercy on the Sabbath rather than letting one be hungry. (Matt. 12:7).
 - d. He explained the rejection of most who rejected Him by quoting from Isaiah. (Matt. 13:14, 15; Isa. 6:9, 10).

- e. He discerned the great commandments above all the commandments of the law. (Matt. 19:18, 19; 22:37-40). He understood that the Law rested on love for God and man.
- f. He clearly set forth the purpose of the Sabbath. (Matt. 12:12; Mk. 3:4; Lk. 6:9).
- g. He showed Old Testament passages that needed to be fulfilled. (Matt. 21:5; Zech. 9:9; 26:31; Zech. 13:7).
- h. He reminded the evil of what the prophets had said. (Matt. 21:16).
- i. He asked some difficult questions that even the learned teachers could not answer. (Matt. 22:41-46).
- j. He made reference to numerous names and events and places.
 - 1) **Matthew** - Moses (Matt. 19:8; David. (Matt. 22:43); Abel (Matt. 23:35); Zechariah (Matt. 23:35); Daniel (Matt. 24:15; Noah (Matt. 24:37); Gomorrah (Matt. 10:15; Sodom (Matt. 10:15; 11:23, 24).
 - 2) **Mark** - Moses (Mk. 1:44); David (Mk. 2:25); Abiathar (Mk. 2:26); Elijah (Mk. 9:12-13).
 - 3) **Luke** - Elijah (Lk. 4:25); Widow in Zarephath (Lk. 4:26); Elisha (Lk. 4:27); Naaman (Lk. 4:27); Moses (Lk. 5:40); David (Lk. 6:3); Jonah (Lk. 11:29,30); Lot (Lk. 17:28); Queen of Sheba (Lk. 11:31); Solomon (Lk. 11:31); Abel (Lk. 11:51). Zechariah (Lk. 11:51); Abraham (Lk. 13:16); Isaac (Lk. 13:28); Jacob (Lk. 13:28; Noah (Lk. 17:26); Sodom (Lk. 10:12; 17:29); Book of Psalms (Lk. 20:22; 24:44).

Note: Once again it is hard to imagine that one who not read or write would have such a knowledge of the scriptures.

F. Jesus was regarded as a teacher by friend and foe alike.

- 1. He taught the scriptures with such clarity and authority. (Matt.7:29; Lk. 4:36).
- 2. He challenges the way the religious leaders taught the scriptures.
- 3. This is hard to explain if Jesus could not read or write.
- 4. His illiteracy would manifest itself if He could not read or write.

Conclusion.

- I. There can be no doubt that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was literate.
- II. We can be fully persuaded that Luke was right when he said.

LUK 4:16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and **stood up to read**.

- A. The fact we do not have documents and writings that Jesus wrote with His own hand proves nothing.
- B. Jesus chose to let others write the biography of His marvelous life.
- C. The writings of Josephus and Philo and the Mishnah indicate that during the reign of the Maccabees that ancient Israel began a system of free public education for boys. All males from the ages of 4 to 13 received a public education and learned to read and write Hebrew and Aramaic as well as the Torah. Josephus expressed great pride in this feat in his book of the history of Israel.

1. We cannot be sure that this was always true.
2. But neither can we be sure Jesus had no public or private education.
3. The fact is we do not know how He learned to read or write, but He could read and write.
4. He could also heal the sick, cast out demons, restore sight to the blind, raise the dead, etc.

III. We must hear and obey Him to be saved. (Jn. 3:36; Heb. 5:9).

- A. He was not only literate, but He was the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Messiah, the King of kings.
- B. He is the One we must listen to in order to please God. (Matt. 17:5; Matt. 28:18; Heb. 1:2).

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