



Chris Keith

The Gospel as Manuscript: An Early History of the Jesus Tradition as Material Artifact

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Julia Lindenlaub
University of Edinburgh

This monograph meaningfully advances the conversation in an important, and growing, area of early Christian studies. Keith situates his thesis in the context of an established dialogue in New Testament research over the primacy of orality or literacy. Voices from antique sources and modern scholars are marshaled to trace this conversation, largely oriented around the work of Werner Kelber (*The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 1983), of whom Keith speaks in the preface as a warm and encouraging interlocutor. Keith thus frames his task as “an invitation to view the relationship between the oral and the written from a perspective that focuses upon how the largely illiterate and oral context of antiquity did not so much diminish the value of the written word as—in some contexts—create it, enable it, and accentuate it” (8). To this end, the book follows two principal themes, the first of which Keith calls competitive textualization: “[the] various ways in which the tradents of the Jesus tradition drew upon its material form ... in order to assert a particular position within a reception history, which was often characterized by claims of superiority” (8). The other theme is the public reading of the Jesus tradition as enabled by the production of written manuscripts.

The book is then divided into three parts. Part 1, “The Gospel as Manuscript,” is directed at modern scholarly discourse, surveying conversation regarding the importance of the material manuscript as an artifact. Two chapters are devoted to the task. Chapter 1, “The Book as Artifact,” is methodological in nature, outlining distinctions between the transmission of tradition in oral and

written media. The result is to demonstrate that the material manuscript undoubtedly participates in oral transmission through public reading but nonetheless retains the potential for ongoing transmission as a physical artifact. Keith adopts a sociological perspective on reading culture informed by William Johnson's "reading communities" (*Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire*, 2010) and Jan Assmann's "kulturelle Texte/Gedächtnis" and "zerdehnte Situation" (*Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, 2018), and both scholars make repeat appearances in later chapters. Unifying Keith's treatment of the two is his focus on the manuscript as nexus between tradition and group identity. Chapter 2, "Sociologies of the Book in the Study of Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity," then asks what the written word in manuscript form accomplishes that the oral gospel does not, situated within scholarly trends concerning book culture in Christian and Jewish contexts: the "material turn" of research on book culture in early Christianity, "text as process" approaches to Jewish and Christian literature, and the study of canon. Here we find the clear influence of Keith's University of Edinburgh professor, Larry Hurtado, as well as thorough engagement with Eva Mroczek (*The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity*, 2016) and Matthew Larsen (*Gospels before the Book*, 2018) and helpful perspective from David Brakke on canon formation. The cumulative effect is to position Keith's argument as a sociological approach to early Christian book culture, set in dialogue with innovative scholarly conversation partners.

Parts 2 and 3 respectively foreground competitive textualization and public reading with the intent to establish "extended situations" that institutionalized reception contexts for the written Jesus tradition. Chapter 3, "The Textualization of Mark's Gospel," begins part 2, "The Gospel as Gospels," by outlining a trajectory of competitive textualization shaping the development of the written Jesus tradition. Keith presents the Gospel of Mark as enabling the reception history of Jesus tradition in the written medium, traced in subsequent chapters through the proliferation of later gospels. Keith calls this the "cannibalization" of Jesus tradition and argues that the written medium of Jesus tradition rendered in manuscript form by the author of Mark was crucial to later authority claims of subsequent texts against their predecessors. Responding to Kelber's prioritization of the oral medium occupies pride of place here, alongside an examination of media-critical aspects of early church fathers' testimonies on the emergence of written gospels from oral proclamation. Chapter 4, "The Competitive Textualization of the Synoptic Tradition," picks up on the theme of "textual self-consciousness" introduced with the Gospel of Mark and applies it to the other Synoptic Gospels. While allowing for varying levels of competitive textualization and textual self-consciousness, Keith presents his evidence for the presence of both in each. In Keith's view, Mark is textually self-conscious in its asides to the "reader" and has a competitive relationship with the Jewish scriptures; in Matthew, self-reference as a βιβλίον affirms textual self-consciousness, and the Jewish scriptures again are a foil for competitive textualization; the Gospel of Luke then heightens both aspects in its prologue description of the task of gospel writing and its competitive relationship to prospective rivals as well as the Jewish scriptures. In summary, the chapter aims to show that the Synoptics all invoke the written medium in competitive authority claims. The Gospel

of John begins chapter 5, “The Competitive Textualization of Johannine and Thomasine Tradition,” with an even stronger emphasis on textual self-consciousness found in its closing colophons. Keith also identifies competitive textualization in these passages, and in making this claim he espouses the Johannine author’s knowledge of the Synoptics. Moreover, in Keith’s view the Gospel of John is self-consciously scriptural and thus takes a step beyond the “softer” expressions of competitive relationship to the Jewish scriptures that he ascribes to the Synoptics. The elevated authority claim of John’s Gospel explicitly invokes the continuity of scriptural textuality with gospel textuality. While the majority of the chapter is spent on John, the Gospel of Thomas appears before its close, with the incipit presenting yet another example of self-conscious textualization. Adopting the view that the author of this text also knows the Synoptics, Keith believes the text’s authorial claim to be a competitive authority bid against such predecessors. Keith also explores the ramifications of his argument in later texts, citing the Secret Book of James (NHC I,2) in conjunction with the Gospel of Thomas. This text’s striking scene of Jesus’s disciples writing accounts of Jesus and its self-conscious textual medium likewise lend themselves to Keith’s case for the progressive development of competitive textualization in the composition of later Christian literature.

Part 3, “The Gospel as Liturgy,” treats the public reading of the gospels as another extended situation for the transmission of written Jesus tradition. For these final chapters, Keith turns from the texts themselves to the use of these texts in Christian assemblies. Chapter 6, “The Public Reading of the Jesus Tradition in the First Three Centuries,” samples pre-Constantinian examples of public reading of the gospels, arguing that the roots of this practice go back into the first century, long before public reading as a criterion for canonization in later centuries. This chapter also highlights references to reading the gospels together with the writings of the prophets, as found in the selected texts. Two scholarly discourses are in view here: the impact of gospel literature on early Christian identity formation; and the preference for orality in New Testament scholarship. The insights from this chapter are then applied in chapter 7, “The Public Reading of the Jesus Tradition and the Emergence of Christian Identity,” to Jewish and Christian identity formation in a Greco-Roman world. Keith argues that public reading of written Jesus tradition was an evolution of synagogue reading, thus a point of contact and distinction between Jewish and Christian identities in the pre-Constantinian period. Keith admits that this argument has been made elsewhere but emphasizes that the book as material artifact serves as a touchstone between Jewish and Christian practices according to his view. To illustrate this point, Keith notes the parallel symbolism of a torah scroll and the Christian codex. The final reflection upon both chapters is thus to conclude that Christian use of gospel manuscripts was a means of identity formation and reflective of a distinctive reading culture dependent on, but distinct from, the Jewish reading practices that came before it.

In the conclusion, Keith summarizes that by textualizing the Jesus tradition the early gospel authors enabled a unique reception history that was profoundly shaped by the written medium. With this closing reflection, the monograph opens new horizons for research on reading culture

and book culture in Mediterranean antiquity. Definitively moving beyond New Testament discourse of orality and textuality in gospel tradition, the perspectives of competitive textualization and textual self-consciousness offer new lenses for analyzing the development of written gospels. Though beyond the scope of the monograph, further texts could easily be brought into this conversation, including additional apocryphal gospels or apostolic texts from Nag Hammadi. The chapter on Johannine and Thomasine traditions helpfully adds the Apocryphon of James to the conversation, which raises the prospect of other examples, such as the disciple Philip writing down Jesus's words in *Pistis Sophia* or Matthew writing the conversation between Jesus and Thomas in the *Book of Thomas* (NHC II,7). Though Keith's body of evidence is necessarily limited for scope, further texts could indeed be examined for internal evidence of gospel reading practices invited by authorial constructs, disciple characters, and implied readerships. Overall, Keith's study is an important contribution to New Testament research on the composition and circulation of gospel literature in the earliest centuries of Christianity.