CHAPTER THREE

WRITING AND GRADATIONS OF LITERACY

Scholars of antiquity have begun to accept what historians of the Middle Ages and early Modern Europe recognized some time ago, that writing and reading were not facets of an undifferentiated process and that interaction between them was less pronounced than it is today.¹

We need to avoid assuming that reading and writing are inseparable skills.²

I had been to school most all the time, and could spell, and read, and write just a little. (Huckleberry Finn)³

Within the Roman imperial context of Palestinian Judaism and the early Church, public education was not provided for everyone, private education was affordable for few, and rarely did a student progress into the upper echelons of the pedagogical process. In this environment, compositional writing was the highest gradation of literacy attainable.⁴

This reality runs counter to the modern mindset, where public education is normally available to all, reading and writing are pedagogically intertwined, and ‘literacy’ can broadly be defined as ‘capable of reading and writing.’ Some adjustment is required for modern readers to understand properly what it means, in a Roman imperial context,

¹ Raffaella Cribiore, Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 177.
⁴ The specific claim here is that compositional writing was the highest form of literacy, but not necessarily education. For those students who would proceed to the highest pedagogical rungs, further studies in rhetoric and philosophy would come after the acquisition of the literate skills. See M.L. Clarke, Higher Education in the Ancient World (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1971); H.I. Marrou, A History of Education in Antiquity (trans. George Lamb; London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 206–216.
to claim that someone was capable of writing. This chapter will therefore survey the literacy landscape of Palestinian Judaism and the early Church with specific reference to the place of writing within that landscape. What follows functions here as an interlude between recognizing that καταγράφω and γράφω in PA represent a claim that Jesus was grapho-literate (Chapter Two) and understanding the role of writing and scribal literacy in the power structures of Roman Judea, specifically as reflected in the NT (Chapter Four).\(^5\)

This chapter will begin with a brief overview of the literacy landscape of the Greco-Roman world by focussing on two issues that complicate modern understanding of ancient literacy: multilingualism and gradations of literacy. The discussion will then proceed to consider the place of writing in the pedagogical process in three contexts pertinent to the present argument: Greco-Roman Egypt; Palestinian Judaism; and the early Church. Though important differences exist between the Egyptian context on the one hand, and both Palestinian Judaism and early Christianity on the other, this chapter will nevertheless observe the essential continuity between the literary environment reflected in PA (first century CE) and the literary environment in which PA was inserted into GJohn (at the latest, fourth century CE): compositional writing was a rarely possessed skill across the Roman Empire, both geographically and chronologically.\(^6\)

1. The Literacy Landscape: Languages and Gradations

The standard work on literacy in the ancient world is that of Harris, where he claims: ‘The likely overall illiteracy level of the Roman Empire under the principate is almost certain to have been above 90%.’\(^7\) Although he allows that, in some areas of the ancient world, lit-