

READING
THE BIBLE
WITH
RABBI JESUS



HOW A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE CAN TRANSFORM
YOUR UNDERSTANDING

LOIS TVERBERG



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In loving memory of my mother,
Laura Evelyn Ritland Tverberg
1922–2017

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Honor her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

Proverbs 31:30–31 NIV

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1



Opening the Bible with Jesus

Emmaus Is Still There

Have you ever tasted fresh pita bread made by the Bedouins? It's out of this world—chewy and hot, crispy in spots, and a little smoky from the open fire. When a veiled, wizened old woman flops a piping-hot piece into your hands, you need to tear a chunk off and pass the rest on before your fingers burn. Smearred with olive oil and dried hyssop, it's like nothing you've ever tasted before.

Sure, you can buy bagged pita bread in your local grocery store, and its nutritional value will be exactly the same. But the mouthwatering aroma of the original simply can't be captured and transported to you. Similarly, the Bible's ideas are often best appreciated “freshly served” in their original Middle Eastern setting.

This is what this book, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus*, is all about—helping you mentally transport yourself back in place and time to read the Bible afresh, as one of Jesus’ first-century disciples.

Maybe you’ve noticed the latest food trend: everyone seems to be into “artisanal” foods. They want to savor authentic flavors, taste food from centuries-old recipes. They love organic cheeses and heirloom vegetables, farmers’ markets and food co-ops. People want to eat *slow* food, not fast food. It takes more time and effort, but it’s worth it, they say.

You know what? I’m into artisanal Bible study.

A lot of us do Bible study microwave-style. We gulp down a prepackaged, presweetened devotion with a few slurps of coffee before heading off to work. Is it at all surprising when it’s bland and unmemorable, like a vending-machine sandwich?

You know how at the end of every cooking show the hosts dish up for themselves a plateful of whatever they’ve been making? Their lip-smacking pleasure over each mouthwatering morsel makes you want to reach right through the screen and take a bite yourself. This is my world, and I invite you to join me. I don’t think a day has gone by that some insight from the biblical world hasn’t made my reading more flavorful.

Studying this way takes more time, of course. Not everyone has time to learn ancient languages, historical details, and cultural ideas, but you’ll be surprised how every little bit of learning is helpful. It’s the same as with cooking. Not everyone can raise their own vegetables and cook from scratch, but adding even a few fresh herbs and local ingredients can liven up any meal.

My personal specialty is serving up the Scriptures Mediterranean-style. Twenty years ago I was turned on to the

importance of studying the Bible in its original Eastern, Jewish context, and I've been looking at Christ through that lens ever since.

I've written two books about Rabbi Jesus before now. In *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* (Zondervan, 2009), Ann Spangler and I explored Jesus' first-century world of rabbis, disciples, festivals, prayers, and the Torah, and showed how his Jewish setting sheds light on the life and ministry of Christ. Later on, in *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* (Zondervan, 2012), I dove deeper into some of Jesus' most important sayings in their Jewish context and considered the implications for us as twenty-first-century disciples.

Now, in *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus*, I want to look at some ways we can mentally bridge the culture gap between his Middle Eastern, Jewish world and ours in order to read the Bible as natives. How can ordinary Christians be equipped to read the Bible from the Hebraic perspective of its first readers? What big-picture ideas do we need to understand? These are questions that I've been asking myself since I started studying the Bible's cultural context.

Embracing Jesus' Jewishness is a fairly recent development in Christian scholarship. In the past few decades, we've been realizing that Jesus has been overly cast within Greco-Roman society to the neglect of his Jewish context. Jesus interacted with a wide spectrum of people—Samaritans, Romans, Greeks—yet his Galilean upbringing and ministry were profoundly, deeply Jewish.¹ While we find Paul preaching to Greek audiences, Jesus' words fit far better into Judaism than a Gentile context. What are the implications? Seeing him in his context sheds brilliant new light on his ministry and deepens our understanding of his words.

A Bible in a Gilded Cage

Truthfully, before I “tasted” the Bible served in its original setting, a lot of it was hard for me to swallow. From my upbringing I was convinced that it was the inspired Word of God, but I found much of it more bewildering than inspiring. The last quarter of my Bible, starting with the book of Matthew, was dog-eared, rippled with coffee mug circles, and filled with highlighting and thoughts penciled into the margins. The first three-fourths, however, remained immaculate.

One of my favorite things about a new Bible is the gilded page edging. As you gently flex the leather covers, the gossamer pages flutter softly past, edges gleaming in the light. Once you start thumbing through it regularly, that glint fades. It’s like a new box of crayons. A tiny rainbow army salutes you when you first open the box, the multihued points standing at perfect attention. But to actually color with them, you’re forced to mar this pristine beauty. Personally, I used to draw with the bottom ends for a while, just to keep the box nice.

Much of the gilded edging of my Bible used to last a very long time too. This wasn’t because I was trying to keep it nice but rather because I found so much of Scripture frustrating and impenetrable. The unbroken golden edging formed a gilded cage that locked away all the strangeness inside.

Many passages were confounding. Sure, there were some beloved characters early on, like Noah and Abraham. Sunday school flannelgraphs and doe-eyed cartoons made them seem soft and approachable. I couldn’t wade in much past Exodus, though, before I hit deep water. Soon I would be adrift in a sea of sacrifices and begats and obscure historical details. Nobody would admit it, but the New Testament was tough at times

too. Some of Jesus' sayings sounded deliberately obtuse. The kingdom is like a fishing net, a seed, a weedy field . . . what? Not to mention Revelation, with all its beasts and plagues.

I envied no one more than the two disciples who encountered Jesus on the Emmaus road in Luke 24, whose hearts burned as an incognito Christ led them on a backcountry hike through their Bible, when “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Wouldn't it have been great to have heard Jesus connect all the dots to show God's great plan all the way through the Bible? If I could get my hands on Marty McFly's DeLorean time machine car, there's no place in history I'd rather go.

Where to Park Your Time Machine

I've already figured out where to park my time machine. A few years ago I spent a winter in a village just northwest of Jerusalem. When I wanted to go into the city I'd take Egged bus #154, which seemed to take forever because we had to pick up passengers from all the nearby villages before entering the city. The massive motor coach seemed ill-suited to the winding lanes. It would lumber back and forth across the Judean hillside, the engine groaning and chugging, gears lugging around each curve. The brakes would screech as it descended a series of switchbacks and squeal to a stop one last time in a hamlet called Motza. Everyone would breathe a sigh of relief when the last commuters boarded, anticipating that soon the on-ramp to Highway 1 would appear. Finally, the bus could accelerate up to a modern road speed

and join the traffic zooming along the six-lane superhighway into Jerusalem.

At that very last stop in Motza, when the doors would swing open for passengers to board, before the underpass—that’s the moment to get off. Stride across the intersection, walk a few dozen yards into the scrub brush, peer through the dried weeds, and you’ll see them: the ancient pavers of the Emmaus road, the stones where Jesus’ sandals walked.

Yes, these are the real, actual stones. Unlike many tourist destinations in Israel, the ancient pavers are not marked in any way. There are no lights and bells, no gift shops hawking Magnum bars, Ahava hand cream, and holy tchotchkes. You simply have to know where to look. Believe it or not, you are standing where you’d park your time machine if you wanted to travel back to the scene of Jesus’ fateful conversation.

Older Bible commentaries say that the site of Emmaus is unknown. Or they pin the location in one of a couple of other places, including Latrun, where a shrine has been venerated as Emmaus for over fifteen hundred years. No one really believes that it’s the place because it’s more than eighteen miles away, an impossible hike for the disciples to take twice in one day, first with Jesus, and then back into Jerusalem for their breathless report that same evening (v. 33).

Most scholars are now convinced that the Emmaus Luke refers to lies right here, under the village of Motza, about three and a half miles from Jerusalem. Its ancient name was *Ha-motza*, meaning “the spring,” which was translated into Greek as *Em-ma-oos*, or Emmaus. Down through the centuries, locals have even known about the ancient Roman road, which was much more visible even a few decades ago. Not many years ago they were still even following the path left

by the remaining stones, which made a convenient trail into the Old City, an easy two-hour walk to the Jaffa Gate.² This was the “Highway 1” that the ancient world knew.

As I’ve studied the Bible in its setting, this discovery is typical of the experiences I’ve had. For centuries we’ve had to be satisfied with improbable church traditions, but when we look closer at the historical record, we find insights that affirm biblical accounts. Often I discover that locals have known about them all along. And sometimes the reality of the world of Jesus is visible even today, hiding in plain sight.

A Jewish Book in a Gentile World

In the very next story after his encounter at Emmaus, Jesus made another surprising appearance, this time to the rest of his disciples. Again he guided them on a scenic travelogue through the Scriptures, saying,

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (vv. 44–47)

Here Jesus refers to his Bible in a very Jewish way, as the “Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.” Two millennia later, this is still the way Jews speak of their Scriptures, what Christians call the “Old Testament” (according to the Protestant canon).³ Commonly the name is shortened to

Tanakh, deriving its consonants from the first letter of the three divisions, the *Torah* (law or Pentateuch), the *Neviim* (neh-vee-EEM: prophets and historical books), and the *Ketuvim* (keh-too-VEEM: writings: psalms, proverbs, etc.). (See appendix A for the books as they appear in the Tanakh.)

The more I pondered the scene on the Emmaus road, the more remarkable it seemed. Luke 24:27 says that “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” The very texts that I found most intractable, the laws of Moses and the prophetic books, were the ones he was preaching from. Indeed, his favorite books to quote from were Deuteronomy and Isaiah, and he quoted from them *a lot*.

Traveling across Time and Culture

After leading his disciples through these Jewish Scriptures and revealing how they pointed to his life and atoning death, Jesus commissioned them to proclaim this message to all the nations (Matt. 28:19). The word he used there for “nations” was *goyim*, which carries the sense of “Gentiles,” or non-Jews.

The more I’ve studied, the more I’ve realized the implications of this fact. The Lutheran upbringing I inherited from my Norwegian-American ancestors was thoroughly Gentile. Because I was unfamiliar with the framework of Jesus’ original setting, I struggled to grasp many ideas that first-century listeners found in the Scriptures.

Admittedly the Bible is a foreign land to us. But it’s not so surprising, considering what happened only a few weeks

after the Emmaus conversation. At Pentecost, God's Spirit poured out on the disciples and turned them into *translators*.

God wasted no time in equipping them to carry their message from one language to the next, one society to the next. The farther they went, the more their audience's cultural background shifted. In order to communicate in ways new listeners would understand, they needed to reframe the good news in terms that made sense to their hearers. It is only logical that after the gospel had gone around the world, we would find ourselves at a distance from its origins.

If we had a time machine, we'd know how to go back in time to Emmaus. Yet there is another journey we need to take, from our Western world to its Middle Eastern setting. New Testament scholar Ken Bailey writes,

The Bible is an Eastern book. We see it through the colored glasses of Western culture. Much is lost. We miss the subtleties of humor and many of the underlying assumptions. We do not understand the ingrained attitudes that illuminate a story or illustration. . . . What lies between the lines, what is felt and not spoken, is of deepest significance.⁴

Indeed, elsewhere Bailey adds,

Having struggled for more than a generation with this problem in both the East and the West, it is my perception that for us as Westerners the cultural distance "over" to the Middle East is greater than the distance "back" to the first century. The cultural gulf between the West and the East is deeper and wider than the gulf between the first century (in the Middle East) and the contemporary conservative Middle Eastern village.⁵

What a thought—that as much of a hurdle as it seems to travel back in time to the Emmaus road, the gap between us and the biblical world is actually wider *culturally* than *temporally*.

What if we could take our own Emmaus journey with Rabbi Jesus, but this time to open our eyes to the Bible's grand themes within their Hebraic Jewish context? In my earlier book *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*, I focused specifically on the Jewish religious context of Jesus. Here, my focus is on our cultural differences with the non-Western, Hebraic thought-world that is so pervasive in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. What wisdom can we learn from their worldview? What might we discover about Christ and his mission that we never knew before? That's what I want to share with you, my readers, in this book.

God often expressed his truth to ancient listeners in ways that shepherds and desert wanderers would understand, in metaphors that escape the modern reader. Sensitizing ourselves to the Bible's age-old imagery will allow us to read it with new eyes. Often this perspective brings into focus the merciful, self-sacrificing Father whom Christ knew and loved rather than the harsh caricature of a God many see there.

We'll listen again with first-century ears to the way Jesus spoke to his contemporaries, making it crystal clear that God's promises were and are met in him. By examining how Jesus fulfilled the prophets' expectations, we'll discover startling truths about Christ's mission and our role as his disciples.

We will be equipped to read Scripture with more insight and inspiration by grasping the perspective of its original audience. We'll take a fresh look at key biblical ideas from an Eastern perspective. We'll go on a journey back in time to help us understand how the Jewish people approached

life, enabling us to rediscover wisdom that's been largely forgotten and allowing us to read God's Word with depth and insight for our lives today.

TOOLS AND REFLECTIONS

Reading

1. Read Luke 24:13–35, paying attention to the conversation going on between Jesus and the disciples.
 - What phrases do they use that are not clear to you?
 - What questions does it raise?
 - What ideas are assumed by the readers?
 - What do you think Jesus said when he used Scripture to explain his mission?
2. If you traveled to a traditional community in the Middle East today, what cultural differences would you expect to encounter compared with where you live?
3. Take a look at appendix A, which lists the three divisions of books of the Hebrew Bible. Compare it with the table of contents in your own Bible. Are there any books that surprise you by where they are placed?
4. What specifically is of interest to you about the Jewishness of the Bible?

Thoughts for Going Deeper

- If you want to know more about the *real* Emmaus road, search for it on the JerusalemPerspective.com website.

The editor, David Bivin, was the one who first showed me the ancient road. Look for his recent report, which explains that because the pavers are not being actively preserved, they are in danger of being lost. (This online journal also contains a wealth of excellent articles on the first-century Jewish context of Jesus.)