

# Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus: How the Jewish Words of Jesus Can Change Your Life

BY JACOB FRONCZAK

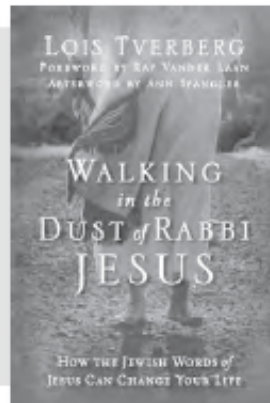
## WALKING IN THE DUST OF RABBI JESUS: HOW THE JEWISH WORDS OF JESUS CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

By: Lois Tverberg

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In scholarly circles, the Jewish Jesus is getting ever more popular. The “radical new perspective” on Paul, which sees Paul as operating within a completely Jewish context (and not departing from Judaism, as classical commentators believed), is also steadily gaining ground, with a growing list of scholarly advocates. Several entire journals and book series are dedicated to the subject of Christianity's Jewish origins and Jewish-Christian relations; even Messianic Judaism is beginning to make its mark. However, it takes time for academic discoveries to percolate into popular culture, and Christian academia is no exception.

The Christian “man on the street” still perceives Jesus through the lens of the church fathers as interpreted by today's popular preachers and writers, and not in the context of His Jewish world. The average churchgoer believes that Paul was using “legalistic” Judaism as a foil for a new concept of grace when he wrote “not by works, lest any man

should boast.” This popular view is elucidated in thousands of books and periodicals; there are comparatively few books that have popular appeal, are thoroughly grounded in the latest scholarship on Jesus and Paul, and are written from a faith-based perspective.

The Messianic world should sit up and take notice, then, that Lois Tverberg, co-author of *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* (Zondervan, 2009), is taking readers even further into the Jewish context of Jesus' teachings in her new volume *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus: How the Jewish Words of Jesus Can Change Your Life*, set to be released by Zondervan this coming February. Like her first volume, *Walking* guides readers through the Jewish matrix of Jesus' life and teaching in an accessible, reader-friendly style, peppered with anecdotes, examples, and vivid imagery.

Tverberg writes for the regular Christian – the mother of three who has little time for Bible study between soccer practice, basketball games, and band concerts; the hardworking father who has to make every minute with his family count; the college student who works part time and volunteers at the local youth group. She has no shortage of friendly ways to engage the attention of her audience, much of which is already over-engaged and needs an easy way to get a fresh look at Jesus' Jewish

context.

But behind the humorous stories and anecdotes lies a potent dose of badly-needed medicine for the wider Christian world. Each chapter of *Walking* focuses on a single aspect of Jesus' teaching, or a specific, widely known teaching of Jesus, that is clearly rooted in the world of Second Temple Judaism. In each chapter, Tverberg patiently guides the reader through the context of Jesus' words, referencing Jewish literature both ancient and modern as well as Christian exegetes who have apprehended the Jewish context of their Master's teaching. At the end of each chapter is a short list of questions designed to facilitate comprehension of the material and further study. These questions make the book easy to use in a small group scenario such as a home Bible study or an adult Sunday school class.

Tverberg begins at a natural starting point for any discussion of Judaism: the Shema. She goes on to the two different *ve'ahavta* passages that Jesus linked together in Mark 12:30-31: love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. These central concepts in Jesus' teaching, Tverberg points out, were also central in the Pharasaic Judaism of His day; but the Hebrew word *ahavah* (to love) carried a far greater weight than it does in modern American culture.

The sense of the word *ahavah* is not just to experience an emotion, Tverberg explains. It encompasses loyalty and loving action as well. God's command to love Him is a command to obey as well as to cherish; likewise Jesus' command to love one's enemy is a command to do him kindness, not merely to cultivate feelings in one's heart.

Tverberg goes on to investigate several of the

moral teachings of Jesus and the Apostles from a traditional Jewish perspective. Drawing on modern Jewish thinkers like Abraham Joshua Heschel and Joseph Telushkin as well as the writings of ancient and medieval sages, she explores the Jewish context of concepts such as the "good eye" (Matt. 6:22), *lashon hara* (evil speech, addressed in James 3), and judging others favorably (Matt. 7:1).

These ethical teachings of Jesus are interpreted in myriads of ways depending on the situation of the reader. The exegetical presuppositions, cultural and linguistic barriers, and prejudices of the reader of Jesus' teachings are liable to cause him to read information into the text that is not there, in an effort to explain what Jesus was talking about. The result is chaotic; Jesus may be (and has been) interpreted as a feminist, or a Communist, or a Buddhist, depending on the exegete.

Tverberg's method – consulting Jewish sources with parallel words and concepts – clears away the dust, so to speak, that often conceals the original meaning of Jesus' teachings from the modern reader. Faulty interpretations are far less likely to hold water once one is familiar with the cultural milieu in which Jesus lived and taught.

The third part of *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* deals with a Jewish conception of the Scriptures themselves – how they are read, understood, and applied. Several important issues are addressed; for example, Tverberg explains that the average Christian learns the Old Testament in Sunday school as a string of disjointed narratives, each with a simple moral lesson. The whole story, though, is much richer and more complex and requires reevaluation and serious study from a Jewish

perspective.

Understanding the context of Jesus' life and ministry means understanding the Scriptures the way He understood them. While many study Bibles contain references to the Old Testament, these references don't always explain the full significance of Jesus' scriptural allusions. Tverberg, on the other hand, explains how even simple parables like the Prodigal Son contain interwoven threads from the Tanakh (Old Testament) which enrich and deepen the Master's teachings for the one who understands the context.

Tverberg also touches on the idea of paradox in the Bible. Modern readers, working within a Western mindset, tend to try to reconcile every apparent contradiction in the Bible. Often this involves forced readings of texts which don't seem to fit into the reader's theological framework. This way of reading the Bible is entrenched in today's Bible colleges and seminaries, in which the discipline of systematic theology is part of the core of the curriculum.

Jewish theologians, on the other hand, are more likely to hold opposing ideas in tension. Tverberg uses the classic debate between Calvinists and Arminians as an example. Do humans truly have free will or does God predestine the fate of all? Christians have historically taken one of the two sides. Jewish theologians, on the other hand, have historically believed in both free will and

predestination; they are both true, two sides of an unresolvable paradox.

Seeing the teachings of Jesus recontextualized within Second Temple Judaism enables the reader to understand them the same way his first hearers did. Once understood, the full power and scope of the words of Jesus can touch the hearts of today's disciples the same way it touched the hearts of the Twelve, igniting a passionate fire of devotion that moves the reader to loving obedience.

Tverberg's ability to explain these concepts (many of which have been historically restricted to technical academic literature) at the level of the average Christian makes her writing accessible and popular. Many Christians who would otherwise have no way to enter into Jesus' Jewish world will find Tverberg's work engaging and interesting.

Tverberg is also a committed Christian who is completely orthodox in her faith, and she reaffirms this fact throughout the book. Unlike some authors (both scholarly and popular) who touch on these issues, Tverberg resonates with the believer's heart. She portrays the Jewishness of Jesus in a positive light while affirming the belief and practice of her Christian audience. *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* would make a great gift to friends and family who are committed believers but have not been exposed to Jesus' Jewish context. It might also find a comfortable home in a local church's lending library. ■