

The background of the book cover is a painting of a small, dark wooden boat on a sandy beach. The boat is positioned on the left side, with its bow pointing towards the center. A red and blue striped cloth is tied around the bow. The sea is a vibrant turquoise color, and the sky is a pale, hazy blue. The overall style is reminiscent of a classical painting.

ANN SPANGLER
LOIS TVERBERG

SITTING
AT THE
FEET
of
RABBI JESUS

HOW THE JEWISHNESS *of*
JESUS CAN TRANSFORM YOUR FAITH

ZONDERVAN

Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus

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Introduction

Writing this book has been for us a joy and a privilege. How lucky can you get to spend the better part of your day, month after month, steeping yourself in the life of Jesus and the Jewish world in which he lived? Even as we worked, our own lives were often affected. For instance, as Easter approached this year, we found ourselves writing the chapter on Passover. Delving into that feast, already ancient by Jesus' time, made it easier to visualize and understand the profound events of Holy Week. It was not difficult to picture Jesus in agony on that lonely night in Gethsemane, his own disciples too exhausted to stay awake and pray, oblivious to the events unfolding around them after consuming the heavy Passover meal with its multiple glasses of wine. Their beloved rabbi was about to be consumed by forces that would set things in motion for the promises imbedded in the feast to be fulfilled. But they had no understanding of its rich depth of meaning until much later.

As we tried to place ourselves in Jesus' Jewish world, layer after layer of history seemed to peel away until we could almost imagine that, for a while we, too, had joined the disciples and were sitting at Jesus' feet.

Gabi Barkai, an eminent Jewish archaeologist, has said that "every day in Jerusalem is a day of discovery." Indeed, the last fifty years have seen many exciting archaeological discoveries in the land of the Bible that, far from undermining faith, have bolstered the historical reliability of the Gospels. What's more, a growing number of Christian scholars have begun to explore the Hebraic roots of Christianity because they realize they have much to learn from their Jewish counterparts about the Jewish customs and traditions that have shaped the Bible. Their research has yielded valuable insights that are not easily available to the general reader.

You might wonder if the authors of this book are Jewish, and the

answer is no. We are Christians who are fascinated with our Savior and his life and teachings. If Jesus had been an Eskimo, we'd be studying Inuit (Eskimo) language and culture, learning about igloos, ice fishing, and polar bears. The goal of this book is not so much to help you understand Judaism as to help you hear Christ's life-changing words with greater clarity and force. God promised Abraham that the Gentiles would be blessed through his descendants. When we honor this ancient people by learning about their culture and customs, God blesses us with a deeper understanding of our Scriptures and of Jesus, our Messiah.

No book, however carefully researched and written, is without its flaws and for these we take full responsibility. We are aware, too, that the study of the Hebraic roots of Christianity is a developing field and that future research may well cause us to revise certain details of Jewish life in first-century Israel. Scholars themselves disagree as to the dating of some details, whether they describe Jesus' time or arose afterward. With these issues in mind, we've done our best to explore and weigh the most current research in the field. We have also been careful to place Jesus within his first-century Jewish context rather than that of later ages. We hope the end result will be of help to pastors, students, and laypeople who find their reading of the Bible all the more fascinating and life transforming as they come to appreciate and understand the Jewish context that shaped it.

Ann is grateful for the privilege of beginning her study of the Jewish world of Jesus with someone who has dedicated more than twelve years of her life to carefully investigating the Jewish context in which Jesus lived and ministered. A molecular biologist by training, Lois Tverberg has shifted her interest and expertise to this emerging field of study, dedicating her considerable intellectual gifts and academic training to the kind of careful, balanced, and inspired research that both authors hope is evident in this book. Time after time as Ann questioned her about a particular statement or point of view, Lois's answers surprised and delighted her, revealing not only a wealth of knowledge but something even rarer—a depth of wisdom. Indeed *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* is a book Lois has wanted to write for many years. Ann is thankful that she waited until she could come alongside to write it with her.

Lois is especially grateful to her scholarly mentors over the years, David Bivin, Randall Buth, Steve Notley, Dwight Pryor, and of course Ray Vander Laan, who instilled this fascination in her life many years ago. For Bruce and Mary Okkema, good friends through this journey, and for the love and prayers of Laura Tverberg, and David and Lora Tverberg and the rest of Lois's family, she has never ceased to give thanks. Most of all, Lois thanks the Lord for these months of writing with Ann, whose mentorship, honest critiques, and delightful creativity have given her a new approach to the craft of writing. Seeing how perfectly the circumstances fell together for our meeting, she hardly has enough words of praise for what God has begun through this relationship.

For those who regularly prayed for us as we wrote and researched—for Linda Bieze, Leslie Dennis, Joan Huyser-Honig, Hillari Madison, Dorothy Spangler, Patti Swets, and Stephanie Wiggins—we are amazed and grateful for how faithfully you kept it up. Special thanks go to Josa Bivin for her helpful feedback and to Marilyn Bright, Kathleen Coveny, and Shirley Hoozeboom, true *haverot* who grappled with each chapter in its roughest form and whose prayers lifted Lois all the way along.

For associate publisher and executive editor Sandy Vander Zicht, who has enthusiastically supported this project from day one and who has offered many helpful suggestions along the way, we say thank you. For Jana Reiss, we are grateful for your careful and insightful review of the manuscript. Your grasp of the material combined with your understanding of the needs of the general reader is truly amazing. We also greatly appreciate the feedback of senior editor at large Verlyn Verbrugge, as well as of Marvin Wilson and Ed Visser on the historical content of the book. Thank you for taking the time to offer such helpful critiques. For Marcy Schorsch, associate marketing director at Zondervan, we are grateful for the creative ways in which you have spread the word about this book. And for Verne Kenney, executive vice president of sales at Zondervan, as well as for his dedicated staff, thank you for caring about this book and for doing your best to get it into as many hands as possible.

Joining Mary at the Feet of Jesus

Let your house be a meeting place for the rabbis,
and cover yourself in the dust of their feet,
and drink in their words thirstily.

— **Attributed to Yose ben Yoezer (second century B.C.)**

Bethany's steep dirt roads are hard on your legs, especially when you've spent a hot day walking uphill the entire way from Jericho. But the smell of Martha's lamb stew wafting from a cooking pot in the front courtyard of her house beckons your dusty legs to keep climbing. You try to ignore your aching feet and the sweat-soaked dirt that clumps beneath your toes, thinking instead of the cool drink she will soon offer. The long hike has been worth it, because the conversation along the way has been absolutely profound. Didn't you feel your heart burning within you as you listened to the rabbi?

A person has to have some *chutzpah* and sturdy legs, you think, to push to the front so that he can hear the conversation. But this afternoon you haven't missed a word even on those narrow paths along Wadi Kelt, where only two or three could be in good listening range. Usually Peter, James, and John would angle their way up toward Jesus, but this time you got there first. Finally you had a chance to ask him some of the questions that had been piling up in your head.

But before you have time to make sense of his answers, your thoughts are interrupted by the cackles of chickens that strut across the courtyard and by Martha's joyous laughter greeting you, the sweat beading on her forehead from her last-minute flurry of preparation. She and Mary share a small stone house that seems to miraculously expand to embrace all the guests that enter. Mary is there, too, greeting each

**Female Students
in the First Century**

Women were encouraged to sit in on the advanced discussions at the synagogue if they were able. A few even acquired the high-level education required to contribute to rabbinic debates, and their words are still on record. Some restrictions on women, like separating men and women during worship, actually arose several centuries later.¹

person. Before you can even sit down, she asks you what Jesus has been talking about on the walk from Jericho.

When family responsibilities allow, Mary sits in on the study sessions at the local synagogue, and she has questions of her own that she's been waiting to ask. She often joins the group for Jesus' after-dinner discussions, and today, even with supper only half-ready, she sits down at Jesus' feet, oblivious of the look on Martha's face, laughing readily with the others over a heated debate that started along the road (Luke 10:38–42).

Wouldn't you love to have joined the boisterous crowd in Martha's house that evening? To have sat with Mary and those incredibly

fortunate disciples who were able to travel with Jesus, to listen to him and learn from him for the three years of his public ministry?

What would it have been like to have been counted among Jesus' closest friends? To have him stay at your house whenever he was in town? Besides being an eyewitness, you would have had the great advantage of being a first-century Jew, someone whose life and experience were shaped by the same culture and religious beliefs that helped shape the life and ministry of Jesus. Like Jesus, you would have observed the laws and traditions of Judaism and would have been familiar with the issues of the day. You would have caught the humor and the nuanced remarks that made his words even more captivating, more life-changing.

Much as we might wish to have seen and heard the Lord in person, we are grateful that we can still experience him in Scripture. And yet the Jesus we meet in the Gospels is not always easy to understand. Partially, this is because we perceive his words at the distance of many centuries, from an entirely different culture, and in a different language. Instead of making our hearts burn, sometimes Scripture makes us scratch our heads in confusion.

I (Ann) remember the first time I met one of my roommates in

graduate school. Gladisín was from Panama and had only been in the country a week when we first met. I liked her immediately. We seemed to get along well despite the language barrier. But I recall how stumped I was when Gladisín turned to me one day and declared, “I have a pain.”

“What is it? What can I do?” I asked. But Gladisín merely stared at me with wide brown eyes and repeated, this time more emphatically: “I have a pain!” The more I tried to discover what was wrong with her, the louder she spoke: “A pain, a paaaiiin!” I wondered if I should call an ambulance or drive her to the hospital myself. But before I had the chance to do anything, it dawned on me. She was merely asking for a pen, a ballpoint pen to fill out some paperwork! I was so relieved I couldn’t stop laughing. A simple request had mushroomed into a medical emergency—all because I couldn’t understand Gladisín’s repeated attempts to say, “Can I have a pen?”

Now consider the challenge of communicating across centuries and religious traditions as well as languages and cultures. No wonder we sometimes find it hard to grasp what Jesus is trying to tell us in the Gospels. But what if we could find a way to fine-tune our hearing, so that we could develop first-century Jewish ears? The words of Jesus that electrified crowds, incensed his enemies, and changed so many lives would have a much greater impact on us.

Is it possible to retune our hearing and thinking so that we can understand Jesus better? We believe it is, because that is exactly what happened to us the moment we began studying Jesus’ Jewish culture. Passages that had previously left us cold or puzzled suddenly came to life. Lights turned on, stories took on new meaning, and the mist began to clear.

Tuning into the customs of Jesus’ time and to the conversations of the rabbis who lived at that time can deepen your faith as it has ours, transforming the way you read the Bible. With that in mind, we invite you to embark on a journey that will take you back to that house in Bethany to hear Jesus’ words again—this time from inside his culture. We hope to teach you how to listen to the Gospels with the ears of a first-century disciple. And once you start tuning in, we are confident you will become even more curious, eager to learn more.

Take the current setting. Why, for instance, were Jesus and his disciples camping out in the home of Mary and Martha? If you had been a first-century Jew, you probably would have heard a saying in circulation for at least a hundred years: “Let your house be a meeting place for the rabbis, and cover yourself in the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily.”²

The Jews of Jesus’ day greatly prized the study of the Scriptures. Many of their most gifted teachers walked from town to town teaching from their Bible, asking no pay in return. People were expected to open their homes, providing food and shelter to these wandering teachers and their disciples. So, as much as we honor Mary for her desire to learn from Jesus, this saying shows us that Martha’s hospitality was an important help to Jesus’ ministry too.

If we were first-century visitors, we would have recognized the significance of something else in that story. It was customary for rabbis to sit on low pillows or chairs while they were teaching. Their disciples would sit on the ground or on mats around them. That’s how the phrase “sit at his feet” became an idiom for learning from a rabbi. In Acts 22:3, Paul described himself as someone who had learned “at the feet of Gamaliel” (NRSV).³ So when Mary was described as “sitting at Jesus’ feet,” she was being described as a disciple. Clearly, Jesus welcomed her as such.

But what about the phrase that speaks of “covering yourself in the dust of their feet”? Some scholars think this is yet another reference to the practice of sitting on the floor as a way of honoring a rabbi and submitting to his teaching. Others think that it refers to how disciples traveled from place to place by walking behind their rabbi, following so closely that they became covered with the dust swirling up from his sandals.⁴ Both ideas describe the context of the story of Jesus’ visit to Mary and Martha’s house with his disciples and add color and meaning to God’s Word.

Yearning to Dig Deeper

Now that you’ve begun to get a taste for why we think it’s helpful to understand the Jewish background of Jesus, we want to let you know

how Lois first became intrigued by the topic. The granddaughter of Lutheran missionaries, she had plenty of Sunday school knowledge. But Lois didn't get serious about her faith until her last year of college. Even then, she was wary of classmates who seemed overly pious. Still, she longed for a way to dig deeper into the Bible—a way that challenged her mind as well as her heart. So she signed up for a course on the New Testament, hoping it would provide some insight. "Instead," she says, "I was discouraged to learn that my professor believed, as did many others, that the New Testament was generally unreliable, composed of documents that had been written very late and were filled with legends from the early church." Her first exposure to the world of biblical criticism deterred her from further academic study of the Bible. Instead she channeled her efforts into obtaining a doctorate in biology.

Many years later, after Lois had become a college professor, her church hosted an adult class on the land and culture of the Bible. The emphasis was on archaeology, history, and the Jewish cultural background of Jesus. "I wondered," she says, "why the presenter didn't share the radical cynicism that my college professor had displayed about the historicity of the Bible." Uncertain what to believe, her instincts as a research scientist drove her to examine the sources behind the course she had recently attended. Her efforts led to a surprising conclusion. In the past few decades an emerging field of study had unearthed a wealth of information confirming and strengthening the Christian faith. In the years since her college class, many new discoveries had changed the way scholars have understood the New Testament texts, particularly in light of their Jewish setting.⁵

The more Lois read, the more fascinated she became with how much richer Bible study can be when you know about Jesus' first-century context. That's when she started some serious study on her own. Each day seemed to bring some new insight, another a-ha moment, like the one from the story that follows. It takes place in the home of Martha and Mary, this time toward the end of Jesus' ministry.

You are probably familiar with a dramatic gesture Mary made one day, sitting at the feet of Jesus once again. John 12:3 describes the scene like this: "Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive

perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

Without understanding the cultural background in which this event occurred, it's easy to miss the full significance of Mary's gesture. What exactly was she trying to communicate? Jesus himself clarified one aspect of the story by commenting that Mary was preparing him for the day of his burial (Matt. 26:12). We understand that her act of devotion pointed toward Christ's death at the end of the week. But we miss something else that the disciples would have immediately realized, something so obvious that Jesus didn't even need to mention it. By anointing him with expensive fragrances, Mary may well have been making a statement about who she believed Jesus was, proclaiming him

Anointing

Anointing a guest with oil was a common, expected act of hospitality (see Luke 7:46). But Mary's use of a breathtakingly expensive vial of perfumed oil in John 12 made her action hint at the anointing of a king.

as Messiah. In fact, the Hebrew word for Messiah is *Mashiach*, which literally means "the Anointed One." *Christos*, or "Christ," is the Greek equivalent.

But why "the Anointed One"? The word "Messiah" alludes to the ceremony used to set apart someone chosen by God, like a king or a priest. Instead of being crowned during a coronation, Hebrew kings were anointed with sacred oil perfumed with extremely expensive spices. Only used for consecrating objects in the temple and for anointing priests and kings, the sacred anointing oil would have been more valuable than diamonds. The marvelous scent that it left behind acted like an invisible "crown," conferring an aura of holiness on its recipients. Everything and everyone with that unique fragrance was recognized as belonging to God in a special way.

In the ancient Middle East, the majesty of a king was expressed not only by what he wore—his jewelry and robes—but by his royal "aroma." Even after a king was first anointed, he would perfume his robes with precious oils for special occasions. Listen to a line from King David's wedding song:

You love righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions

by anointing you with the oil of joy.
All your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.
(Psalm 45:7–8)

Consider, too, this passage about King Solomon:

Who is this coming up from the desert
like a column of smoke,
perfumed with myrrh and incense
made from all the spices of the merchant?
Look! It is Solomon's carriage,
escorted by sixty warriors,
the noblest of Israel. (Song of Songs 3:6–7)⁶

During royal processions, the fragrance of expensive oils would inform the crowds that a king was passing by.

Now take a look at another scene from the Old Testament. It describes a newly anointed Solomon being led into Jerusalem from the spring of Gihon, just outside the city, and then parading through the streets on a mule while people stood by and cheered:

So Zadok the priest . . . went down and put Solomon on King David's mule and escorted him to Gihon. Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the sacred tent and anointed Solomon. Then they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted, "Long live King Solomon!" And all the people went up after him, playing flutes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound. (1 Kings 1:38–40)

Now consider a striking parallel in the life of Jesus. It happened the week before his death, right after Mary anointed him with the expensive perfume.⁷ Just as Solomon had done a thousand years earlier, Jesus rode a donkey on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Imagine the scene as recounted in John 12. The crowd was not greeting an ordinary rabbi. No, people were shouting out: "Hosannah! Blessed is the king of Israel." They were remembering Solomon, the son of David, who long ago had ridden through their streets on a mule, and now they were proclaiming that Jesus was the promised "Son of David," whom God had sent to redeem his people.

But the significance of Mary's action doesn't stop there. It seems likely that the smell of the perfume with which Mary anointed Jesus would have lingered for days. God may have used Mary's act of devotion to telegraph a subtle but powerful message. Everywhere Jesus went during the final days of his life he had the fragrance of royalty. Jesus smelled like a king.

Imagine, in the garden of Gethsemane, as Judas and the guards approached Jesus to arrest him, the guards must have sniffed the air and wondered who stood before them. When Jesus was on trial, mocked, whipped, and stripped naked, even then the aroma may have clung to him. What an amazing God we have!

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ [the *Anointed One*] among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. (2 Corinthians 2:14–16).

What a fascinating parallel, which shows what Paul meant by the "aroma of Christ." As Jesus' followers, we spread the fragrance of our anointed Messiah everywhere we go.

Why Focus on Jesus' Jewishness?

Ken Bailey is a prominent biblical scholar, known for his unique insights into the gospel, based on his long familiarity with Middle Eastern culture and languages, past and present. When asked whether his discoveries threaten to overturn what Christians think they know about the Bible, Bailey responds, "Suppose I've spent my life going to a beach. I've seen waves splashing against rocks, ships on the water, fishermen casting lines. One day at this beach someone says, 'Ken, I have two snorkels. Let's go.' Suddenly I see coral, seaweed, and fish. These undersea views in no way invalidate the beauty of what's above. In my work, I'm looking for the coral and the fish."⁸

Similarly, instead of undermining our faith, looking at the Jewish background of the Bible deepens our understanding of Jesus and his

times, increasing our awe as we look more closely at this extraordinary rabbi and his astonishing claims. In *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey wisely comments, “I can no more understand Jesus apart from his Jewishness than I can understand Gandhi apart from his Indian-ness. I need to go way back, and picture Jesus as a first-century Jew with a phylactery on his wrist and Palestinian dust on his sandals.”⁹

As Christians we can never forget that the Bible—from Genesis through Revelation—is essentially a Jewish document. Once we begin to read it from a Jewish perspective, our experience of it will be transformed, as though we have just swapped an old black-and-white TV with its scratchy image for the latest flat screen, high-definition set. Suddenly the Bible takes on new depth and color as we read the familiar stories once again, but this time from the perspective of its original audience.

A couple of cautions. It’s not hard to become fascinated with Judaism for its own sake simply because of the antiquity of its traditions and because many of its practices are wise and biblical. But keep in mind that more than two thousand years have passed since Jesus was born. Over the centuries a lot has changed. Some Jewish practices and traditions harken back to his time, but many others do not. Bearing these cautions in mind, let’s dive in and begin looking for the “coral and the fish,” the wonders that lie just beneath the surface.

A Glimpse of Life in the First Century

As we begin to explore, looking beneath the surface of things, let’s take a quick look at Israel in the first century. Already the picture of Jewish life painted by the Old Testament is hundreds of years out of date. During the Old Testament, for instance, there is no mention of rabbis, synagogues, Pharisees, Sadducees, or Zealots.

Sadducees

The Sadducees came primarily from the ruling priestly and aristocratic classes. Unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, and they considered only the written Torah (i.e., the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) as binding. Despised as collaborators with Rome, they controlled the temple worship. Their influence ceased with the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

Most of the people living in the land of Judea and Galilee are the descendants of pious Jews who returned to Israel after their exile in Babylon. Since then, life for the chosen people has been anything but idyllic. Their Roman occupiers are universally hated for their brutality and pagan ways, to say nothing of the oppressively high taxes they levy. Little wonder that everyone is longing for a Messiah to come and deliver them by throwing out their harsh oppressors.

Though anticipation is high, opinions vary about just how or when the Messiah will finally arrive. Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, and Pharisees—each has a different take on what has happened and why, and on how the future will unfold. Political tension and spiritual fervor are both on the rise. It is into this time of intense spiritual searching that another rabbi comes striding onto the scene. He hails from Nazareth. Can anything good come out of Nazareth?