

5

Hebrew Words that Every Christian Should Know

A BITE-SIZED BIBLE STUDY

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*How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

Psalm 119:102

INTRODUCTION

Spicy, Savory Words

Have you noticed the latest food trend? Growing numbers of people are into artisanal foods. They love organic cheeses and heirloom vegetables, farmer's markets and food co-ops. They 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.

As Christians, we all know that it's important to sustain ourselves daily with the Scriptures. But time is short, so many of us do Bible study microwave-style nowadays. We gulp down a pre-packaged devotion with a few slurps of coffee before heading off to work. Is it at all surprising when it's as bland and unmemorable as a vending-machine sandwich?

There's actually a way to spice up your study, by getting to know some of the Bible's wise Hebrew words. They're aromatic and savory, carrying a distinct scent of the rich, earthy depths of their ancient origins.

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 rip off a chunk 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.

It's the same with Hebrew words. Out of necessity for us to read them, we've had to "package" them into English sentences, like the bagged pitas you find at the grocery store. But some of their more subtle flavors simply don't travel well across languages and time, even if their "nutritional value" hasn't changed. In order to taste the breadth of expression of the Bible's ancient words, you have to travel back mentally into their original Middle Eastern setting.

Why Hebrew? Well, Hebrew is God's heart language—the mother tongue of the Scriptures Jesus read. Hebrew is also an extremely rich, poetic language that looks at the world in very different ways than English. Grasping the depth of even a few words greatly clarifies and enriches reading, and casts new light on things that you *thought* you understood. You'll see humor, irony and timeless wisdom where you passed it by before.

Often, knowing the original, fuller sense of a biblical idea will challenge and change you, as its ancient wisdom puts your life into the perspective of God's eternal Word.

Roomy Suitcases

Let's look at Hebrew words another way. Rather than being "packaged" into sentences, you could say that words *themselves* are packaging. Words are the luggage that we use

to transport our thoughts into the minds of others.

In English, we have an enormous number of “suitcases,” words with various shades of meaning and formality. Some dictionaries put the number at 100,000, some more. But believe it or not, biblical Hebrew has only about 8000 words, a tiny fraction of the vocabulary of English.

You might wonder how Hebrew can communicate with so few words. The reason is that each “suitcase” is roomier inside—deeper, wider, more spacious. Many Hebrew words carry a wider range of meaning than the corresponding word in English. Unpacking the ideas within a Hebrew “suitcase” is often enormously helpful in Bible study.

We English speakers are used to very precise meanings, and we expect to have everything carefully defined. But Hebrew words paint scenes in broad brushstrokes, leaving the listener to discern the meaning from the context.

The prophets and biblical writers actually seemed to delight in pondering the nuances of their language. They often made wordplays based on a word’s ambiguity, deliberately invoking multiple layers of a word’s meaning.

For instance, the word *ruach* (roo-AKH) means “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit.” When God’s *ruach* blew through the Valley of Dry Bones to bring new life in Ezekiel 37, we see that *all* of its various meanings are intended.

I’ve always imagined that God chose to reveal his Word in Hebrew because the language invites us to think more deeply. As we read the Scriptures, we ask God what he is saying to us again and again.

Hebrew is helpful not just for reading the Old Testament

(which was mostly written in Hebrew), but the New Testament too. Although it was written in Greek, it was composed almost entirely by Jews growing up in a Hebrew-speaking, Semitic-thinking culture. Often you hear a Hebraic “accent” even in the Greek text. Knowing more about the Hebrew way of looking at the world is helpful in reading the Scriptures from beginning to end.

A Unique Online Bible Study

Below I’ve shared five of my favorite Hebrew words, to let you “taste” the various flavors within them. We’ll trace a word through various passages that show its breadth of meaning. At the end of each word study, I’ve included some thoughts for further reflection.

You might think the only way to learn a Hebrew word is to take a seminary language class. But there’s actually a much simpler way to get started, which is by studying a word while comparing Bible translations side-by-side. Some Bible translations try to use the most direct, literal English equivalent. Others choose an idiomatic meaning to bring the sense of the passage into modern English. With a bit of guided comparison of verses and translations, you can often start to get a sense of a word’s range of meaning, and see why translators made the choices they did.

Nowadays it is easy to do this online, so I specifically designed this ebook with technology in mind. Each passage in this study links to a window at BibleGateway.com where you can see three Bible translations side-by-side and compare them for yourself. I’ve chosen three Bibles that span the

spectrum of translation: the very word-for-word King James Version (KJV), the very idiomatic New Living Translation (NLT), and the New International Version (NIV), which aims to balance literalism with meaning. I'm not endorsing any of these translations as better than others—I purposely chose them because of their differences. You're welcome to look up verses in your own Bible too.

One thing to note—if you read through this book without clicking on the Bible passages, you'll miss some of the best insights in this study. The differences in translation are often quite remarkable, and they illustrate how difficult it is to bring Hebrew ideas into English. If you can't access the internet, you can do much of the study the “old-fashioned” way, by comparing a modern translation with the King James Version. In a group, you'll likely have at least one “connected” person present who can look at the passages online and share with everyone.

At the end of these five short word studies I'll share some more thoughts, and give you some ideas for how to keep learning.

(Note to Hebrew specialists: Please forgive the fact that I'm using a single rough equivalent for an entire verb stem. My goal is to share a few Hebrew “word-concepts,” not to teach the language.)

CHAPTER ONE

Yirah

Turning Fear into Worship

The idea that we should “fear the Lord” is found dozens of times in the Old Testament. You also find “fear” in the New Testament. The Gentiles who believed in God were called God-fearers, and the early church was said to be built up in the “fear of the Lord” (Acts 9:31). Why is there so much fear in the Bible?

To solve this mystery, you need to know that the word we translate as “fear” has a much broader range of meaning than we have in English. To us, “fear” is the opposite of trust, and its synonyms are fright and dread. But the Hebrew equivalent, *yirah* (pronounced YEER-ah) encompasses meanings from negative (dread, terror) to positive (worship, reverence) and from mild (respect) to strong (awe). Believe it or not, every time you read “revere” or “reverence” in English, the Hebrew word behind it is *yirah*!

Take a look at [Leviticus 19:3](#), where God commands us to “*yirah*” our mother and father. The KJV says that we should “fear” them, but other translations clarify that the

sense here really is “respect” or “revere.” How would you translate this word?

On the other hand, *yirah* can often simply mean “be afraid.” In [Genesis 32:11](#) Jacob fears meeting his brother Esau, knowing that he earlier wanted to kill him for cheating him out of his birthright.

How can we know which meaning *yirah* has? From the context. You might find this frustrating, but English does the same thing. You can get a run in your stocking, or get a run in baseball. Our minds are used to inferring meaning from context. Hebrew just does this much more than English does.

Take a look at some other places where *yirah* is obviously very positive:

- [Deuteronomy 10:21](#) says (NIV), “he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome (*yirah*) wonders you saw with your own eyes.” (What does the KJV say?)
- [Psalm 66:3](#) also uses *yirah* to exalt God’s glory: “Shout for joy to God, all the earth!...Say to God, ‘How awesome (*yirah*) are your deeds!’”

You can see here that even though *yirah* can connote fear, the same word can mean something very different, something nearer to “awe,” “respect,” or “reverence.” Often it’s good to have all of these ideas in mind as you read.

An even stronger word for “fear,” *pahad*, (which is often translated “dread”) can also describe jaw-dropping awe. In Isaiah 60, the prophet describes a stunning vision of God’s final redemption of Israel. The forlorn nation’s long lost

children will return, and royalty from distant lands will bring lavish gifts to honor them. As a result, the people’s hearts “will *pahad* and swell with joy.” ([Isaiah 60:5](#)) Here, *pahad* means “thrill”—how much better can “fear” get than that?

This can help with understanding the “fear of the Lord.” Certainly God’s enemies cringe in terror of him, but those who love him should be full of awe. Whenever the Bible speaks about the “fear of the Lord” (*yirat Adonai*) in the lives of people who love him, it is better understood as being an awe and reverence for God that causes us to want to please him. That’s why Proverbs tells us,

Whoever fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death. ([Proverbs 14:26-27](#))

If you’ve always thought that God expects you to shake in fright at him, knowing the wider meaning of “fear” can change the way you see God!

Sometimes *yirah* has yet another sense. Rather than referring to the emotions of “fear” or “awe,” it can refer to how they are lived out in the action of “worship.” This is why we hear of “God-fearers” in the New Testament. They are really “God-worshippers,” people who revere and worship the God of Israel.

Fear and Worship in Jonah

The first chapter of Jonah vividly illustrates the breadth of the word “fear” by deliberately playing on the word’s

wide meaning. Use this link to read [Jonah 1](#). Note the difference in how “fear” is translated in verses 9, 10, and 16 between the three Bibles. Then, read my comments below.

- (Jonah 1:9) When the sailors ask Jonah to identify himself, he says that he is a Hebrew who “fears” the God who made the heaven and the earth. Here, “fear” means worship. Jonah is part of the people who worship the true God, not the idols everyone else does.
- (Jonah 1:10) But then the men were exceedingly afraid (literally, “they feared a great fear”) because Jonah was fleeing from this God, who had sent a storm that was now threatening to destroy their ship.
- (Jonah 1:16) After the sailors threw Jonah overboard and the sea grew calm, the sailors again “feared a great fear”—but now in a very different sense. Now, fear has turned into worship. The sailors are awestruck, stunned by the power of God, and now they offer him sacrifices and make vows in order to worship him.

In the KJV, you’ll find “fear” in all three verses, even though in 9 and 16 the idea of “worship” is really closer to the sense of the word. The other two translations actually do a better job of communicating the intent of the text.

When you grasp how “fear” is being used in this story, you see the utter irony. Jonah was trying to run away from being a prophet to the Gentiles, but in spite of himself, he

succeeded at that very task. The pagan sailors had begun to worship the God that he was fleeing from!

It's a foretaste of what will happen when Jonah gets to Ninevah. The evil city will repent of their sins and bow down to God, but Jonah will just get angry about it. The Gentiles had a lot to learn about God, but Jonah had even more.

For Reflection

Consider God's words in [Psalm 147:7-11](#). What does the "fear of the Lord" look like in your own life? Is it about being afraid of him, or being full of hope and worshipful awe?

In [Philippians 2:12](#), Paul tells us to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling." The same phrase, "fear and trembling" is used in an intensely positive way in [Jeremiah 33:9](#). How does your understanding of Paul's words change when you read it in light of the passage in Jeremiah?

Further Reading

Read "[Does God Want Us to Fear Him?](#)" on the [OurRabbi-Jesus](#) website. It shares some of the wise ways that the "Fear of the Lord" (*Yirat Adonai*) is understood in Jewish thought.

If you would like to look at more verses where *yirah* occurs, [use this link](#) at [BlueLetterBible.com](#).

CHAPTER TWO

Shema

Having Ears to Hear

Often Jesus concluded a teaching with “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” What in the world did he mean? Knowing what it means to “hear” in Hebrew can shed a lot of light on this mystery as well as others.

We think of “hearing” as simply taking in sound, but *shema* (pronounced “shmah”) really means more than that. Let’s look at what *shema* means in different contexts:

- When the people of Babel started building a tower, God thwarted their plans by confusing their languages so that they would not “hear” each other’s speech ([Genesis 11:7](#)). Here, *shema* means “understand.”
- When Sarah came up with a plan to solve the couple’s infertility problems by Abraham sleeping with Hagar, the text says, literally, that Abraham “heard the voice” of Sarah. ([Genesis 16:2](#)) In this case, it means that he agreed and decided to

go along with her plan.

- Joseph, on the other hand, did not “hear” Potiphar’s wife as she seductively beckoned him to come to bed with her ([Genesis 39:10](#)). It doesn’t mean that he didn’t understand her, but that he ignored her, that he refused to do what she asked.
- Think of all the times an angel appears to announce that the Lord has “heard” someone’s prayers ([Genesis 16:11](#), [Luke 1:13](#)). Once again this doesn’t mean that God just got the news, but that he’s responded—that he’s answered their prayers.

The word *shema* can refer to hearing or to any of the actions that result: listening, understanding, responding, doing what is asked. If you think about it, this is logical. Have you ever yelled at your kids to do something and then, when nothing happens, followed up with, “Are you deaf?” You’re making the same assumption—that their ears should be connected to their feet. If nothing happens, there’s something wrong. In Hebrew,

hearing → **listening** → **understanding** → **doing**

Now, take a look at [Deuteronomy 11:13](#). The Hebrew literally says, “And it will be, if *hearing* you will *hear*...” This isn’t what you’ll see in most translations. What do you find?

If you didn’t see it, most Bibles interpret this phrase as being about obedience. In fact, if you look up all the places where the word “obey” occurs in English, the Hebrew word

behind it is almost always *shema*. So, believe it or not, to *shema* is to “obey,” as much as it is to “hear.”

The word *shema* actually encompasses *both* what is going on in your head and what results in your actions. In Hebrew, having “ears to hear” means responding in obedience. If you don’t, you have “ears, but do not ‘hear.’”

Now, consider [Matthew 13:10-16](#), where Jesus was talking about having “ears to hear.” See if it doesn’t make more sense. As you read this passage, how is the “hearing” of the disciples different than that of the crowds? Is the problem Jesus’ words, or their “ears”?

Look at [Acts 7:51](#). What do you think it means to be “uncircumcised in heart and ears”?

Hear, O Israel

The *Shema* is also the name of the prayer that has been recited by observant Jews (including Jesus) every morning and evening for thousands of years. It begins with [Deuteronomy 6:4-5](#):

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.
Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

The *Shema* was a daily recommitment to love God and to dedicate yourself to following God and obeying his will.

Once again, the first word of the *Shema* isn’t just about “hearing.” It meant, “Take heed!” “Listen and respond!” It’s a call to live out your love for God with every part of your being.

For Reflection

Read [Mark 12:28-30](#), where Jesus quotes these central words of faith in the *Shema*. What does it mean to live out the great commandment with all your heart?

How well do your ears “hear” in the sense of actually doing the things you’ve heard? When “doing” doesn’t happen, what are the most likely reasons? What can you do about it?

Further Reading

See the following articles on the [OurRabbiJesus](#) website:

[Shema: To Hear is To Obey](#)

[Learning to Think in Hebrew](#)

For the full text of the *Shema*, and what this prayer has meant in the lives of Jews from the first century until today, see [Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus](#), chapter 2, “*Shema*: Living Out What You Hear.”

If you would like to read more verses where *shema* occurs, [use this link](#) to [BlueLetterBible.com](#).

CHAPTER THREE

Pakad

When God Comes to Visit

There are some Hebrew words that really can't be translated into English, and *pakad* (pronounced pah-KAHD) is one of the most fascinating. It can be a wonderful word or a terrible word, depending on the context. How can this be?

Well, imagine that you're twelve years old again. One afternoon, your mom yells, "Just wait until your father gets home!"

What did she mean? It depends on the context. Maybe it's your birthday and your dad has gone to get the pizza, ice cream and balloons for the big party you're going to have. Then, you just can't wait.

But, if your mom has just discovered a report card full of F's under a huge pile of laundry in your filthy room... then it has a very ominous overtone.

That's kind of what the word "*pakad*" means. In the King James, *pakad* is translated as "visit" even though you can tell that it's not being used in the normal sense of the word. It never refers to knocking on a person's door and saying hello.

You likely recall hearing it in [Psalm 8:4](#):

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him?

How do modern versions translate this line?

You also find *pakad* in [Ruth 1:6](#), where God “visits” his people by ending their famine. Here it means that God came to their aid, rescued them from their crisis. And, in [1 Samuel 2:21](#), God “visits” Hannah by answering her tearful prayers for a son.

It can be a wonderful thing when God “visits” you in the sense of answering your prayers and rescuing you from distress. And it’s simply amazing that God cares for us, and is mindful of our daily needs.

The Opposite Kind of Visiting

Now, consider how “*pakad*” is used in [Exodus 32:34](#):

In the day when I visit, I will visit their sins upon them.

Here the word has very negative implications. You dread this kind of “visit,” just like you dread your dad coming home when you’re in big trouble with your mom.

What *pakad* has in common in each of these lines is the idea of “paying attention to.” When God pays attention to a person, he cares for them. When God pays attention to someone’s prayers, he answers them. But when he pays attention to someone’s sins, he punishes them.

The prophets were fully aware of the sharp double edge of *pakad*, and they would drive home a point by using both

meanings of the word in the very same line. Just listen to how Jeremiah uses *pakad* in a poetic, paradoxical way to denounce the corrupt leadership of Israel in [Jeremiah 23:2](#).

Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the LORD.

Because they have not *pakad*’ed his sheep, he will *pakad* their sins! You’ll find it interesting to see how different translations bring this ironic wordplay into English.

A few lines later, in Jeremiah 23:12, the prophet again employs the word for maximum effect, when he speaks of “the year of their visitation” (*pekudah*, peh-koo-DAH). The time was coming when God would focus his attention like a laser beam on the state of his nation. Whether it would be a time of great light or great destruction would depend on them, and their response.

The Time of Your Visitation

Jesus also used this same word to make a similar prophetic statement against the Temple and Jerusalem during his triumphal entry into the city in [Luke 19:43-44](#). In the King James, the Temple would be destroyed because “thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.” How do other versions translate this passage?

Here, Jesus was not simply referring to how he “visited” by coming to earth. Rather, he was using the phrase, the “time of visitation” to speak of an ominous time of God’s

examination of his people's deeds. It could be a time of God's salvation, or, more likely, a time of punishment.

Indeed, the coming of Christ captured the strongest meaning of the word *pakad* in its Hebraic context. For those who repented and followed Christ, God had come to their rescue, to save them eternally; but for those who ignored him, it would be the source of their punishment, when God would "visit" their sins in the judgment to come.

For Reflection

Meditate on [Psalm 65:9-13](#). In verse 9 it uses *pakad* to describe how God “visits” the earth. What is the wonderful result?

Consider what Peter says in [1 Peter 2:11-12](#) about the “day of God’s visitation.” How was he using this phrase? How does it speak to how we live today?

Further Reading

See chapter 3 of [Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus](#) to discover how Jesus’ words overflowed with “hints” to his Scriptures, our Old Testament, and how they often communicated how he was fulfilling God’s great promise to send a Messiah who would redeem his people.

If you would like to read more verses where *pakad* is used, [see this link](#) at [BlueLetterBible.org](#).

CHAPTER FOUR

Yadah

To Know and Be Known

We live in the digital age, where we can access limitless information via the Internet. To us, “knowing” relates to this vast database of facts and understanding. To know is to have a mental comprehension of reality.

It may surprise you to learn that the Hebrew word for knowing, “*yadah*” (yah-DAH) means so much more. Rather than consisting primarily of mental activity, *yadah* speaks of relationship and experience, of commitment and loyalty and trust. In William Barrett’s book, *Irrational Man*, he describes *yadah* this way:

Biblical man too had his knowledge, though it is not the intellectual knowledge of the Greek. It is not the kind of knowledge that man can have through reason alone, or perhaps not through reason at all; he has it rather through body and blood, bones and bowels, through trust and anger and confusion and love and fear; through his passionate adhesion in faith to the Being whom he can never intellectually know.

In English we use the word “know” in terms of being aware of someone’s identity and being familiar with them. But when the Bible speaks about someone “knowing” another, the idea often goes far beyond familiarity. Often “knowing” involves having concern for one another and acting on the basis of that concern. For instance, [Proverbs 12:10](#) says, literally, that the righteous “know” the lives of their animals, but most translations interpret this as saying that the righteous “care for their animals’ needs.” To “know” someone can even mean to be intimate with them. After Adam “knew” (*yadah*) Eve, she gave birth to Cain. ([Genesis 4:1](#))

Look at [Psalm 1:5-6](#). The KJV says that God “knoweth the way of the righteous.” The implications of *yadah* are much stronger here than just “knowing.” How do modern translators render this line?

Knowledge as Devotion

Often, the word *yadah* points beyond academic knowledge to loyalty and devotion. This is especially true with God. For instance, [Psalm 91:14](#) reads, “I will protect him, for he knows my name,” but the New English Translation spells out its meaning more clearly: “I will protect him because he is loyal to me.” Hebraically, to “know” God is to recognize and accept his claims of authority over one’s life, to be in obedient relationship with him.

Conversely, the opposite of the “knowledge of God” is not ignorance, but rebellion. For instance, [1 Samuel 2:12](#) says that the wicked sons of Eli the priest “did not know the LORD.” They served in the tabernacle, so they certainly

knew who God was! But they had complete disregard for God’s authority.

Similarly, when Moses came to Pharaoh to demand the release of his people, Pharaoh said, “I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.” ([Exodus 5:2](#)) This wasn’t a statement about belief, but that he was refusing to acknowledge God’s authority or accede to his demands.

Consider, then, what the fuller sense of the “knowledge of God” means for Christ’s great commission to teach all the nations. [Isaiah 11:9](#) prophesies the great final fulfillment of God’s plan, that “...the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” This sounds as though God’s goal is that we convince people intellectually about the claims of the gospel. But the Jewish (JPS) version spells out the intention of the Hebrew here more clearly. It says that the earth “will be full of *devotion* to the Lord as the water covers the sea.” Our mission is not just to communicate facts, but to help others come into an intimate relationship with Christ, to become utterly devoted to him.

Knowing by Experience

Sometimes the word *yadah* refers not just to knowledge or relationship, but to experience. Some kinds of knowledge can be gained in no other way but by experience. For instance, [Genesis 25:27](#) says that Esau was a skilled hunter—literally, he “knew” hunting. And [Isaiah 53:3](#) describes “a man of sorrows, and familiar with (literally, “knowing”) suffering.” Some kinds of knowledge come only through experience.

Knowledge, in this sense, is key to understanding Jesus' words in [John 8:31-32](#). In Jesus' culture, rabbis chose just a few disciples who would live and study with them day and night for years. They expected that over that time their disciples would not only grow to be like their rabbi in knowledge, but in character too. Here Jesus is describing how by following his teaching day by day, we will know the supreme truth of his words.

For Reflection

Think of Jesus' words about his sheep who know him in [John 10:14-15](#). How does understanding the wider Hebraic sense of *yadah* expand your understanding?

How much does your “knowledge of God” focus on intellectual comprehension rather than passionate faith?

Meditate on what God's intimate knowledge of you in [Psalm 139:1-6](#) might mean as you go about an average day. Where is God that you didn't consider before?

Further Reading

See Chapter 12 in [Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus](#), called “The Secrets God Keeps” for more about what *knowing* God really means, in its Hebraic sense.

See chapter 4 of [Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus](#) to learn more about the rabbinic method of training disciples.

If you would like to read more verses where *yadah* occurs, [see this link](#) at [BlueLetterBible.com](#).

CHAPTER FIVE

Zakhar

Living Out a Memory

In several places in the Bible, God says, “I will not remember your sins.” But how can God, in his infinite intellect, forget something?

The answer to this and other mysteries comes from grasping the wideness of the Hebrew word for “remember.” The word *zakhar* (zah-KHAR), “remember,” doesn’t only refer to what happens in a person’s brain. It can also describe the actions that result from remembering, like doing a favor for someone, helping them, or being faithful to a promise or covenant.

Let’s take a look at it in a few places.

In [Genesis 8:1](#), it says that God “remembered” Noah and sent a wind to dry up the flood waters. If you think of “remembering” as only about what goes on in your brain, this verse sounds comical—as if God woke up one morning and slapped himself on the head, realizing that Noah’s boat was out bobbing on the waves! Obviously that’s not what the text is saying here. It’s really about God’s actions—that he was

fulfilling his promise to save Noah and acting on his behalf.

Likewise, in [Genesis 30:22](#) it says that “God remembered Rachel,” and she got pregnant. Once again, *zakhar* is about God’s kind actions in concern for Rachel.

When *zakhar* is used in the context of sin, as in [Ezekiel 33:14-16](#), its implied action becomes negative:

If I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ but they then turn away from their sin and do what is just and right...none of the sins that person has committed will be *remembered* against them. They have done what is just and right; they will surely live.

Here, a sin is “remembered against” a person when they are punished for it. We also see this in [Hosea 9:9](#):

They have deeply corrupted themselves, as in the days of Gibeah: therefore he will *remember* their iniquity, he will *visit* their sins. (KJV)

The last part of this verse is a parallelism, where the phrases are synonymous in order to emphasize an idea. Can you see how “remembering” and “visiting” overlap here?

In Hebrew, to “not remember sins” doesn’t necessarily imply that God loses the ability to recall them. It simply means that he has decided to forgo prosecution. It refers to God’s *actions*, rather than his mental recall.

I find this very freeing in terms of understanding God’s expectations of us. If a person has hurt us repeatedly, does forgiveness mean to pretend that the person won’t act the same way again? The idea that we can decide not to “remember” someone’s sins by not seeking revenge allows us

to protect ourselves and be wise about the future.

If you think about it, if God could simply delete things from his data banks, he'd have a much easier time forgiving than we do. We humans have to put aside our grievances every time a memory returns, forgiving again and again. But the more we love one another, the easier it becomes to remove the past from our minds. Perhaps, then, God's infinite love really *does* remove our sins from his infinite mind.

Remembering and Forgetting

Just as “remembering” includes action, the Hebrew words for “forget” (*shakach* and *nashah*) have a similarly broad meaning that includes action. They can mean to deliberately ignore or disregard something, forsake someone, or violate an agreement.

This sheds light on a scene in Joseph's life in Egypt. After he was imprisoned, he interpreted the cupbearer's dream, telling him that he would soon be released. But then Joseph pleaded, “When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; remember me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison.” ([Genesis 40:14](#)). Unfortunately we hear later that “The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.” ([Genesis 40:23](#))

You might think that Joseph's request just slipped the cupbearer's mind. But in Hebrew it's just as likely that the cupbearer ignored Joseph's request and just decided not to act on it. Hebraically, you've “forgotten” if you act like it, regardless of what's going on in your mind!

This helps us understand why in [Deuteronomy 4:23](#) Mo-

ses warns Israel,

So watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of the LORD.

To “forget” God’s covenant is to willfully disregard it, not just to draw a blank about having made it at all. This also sheds light on [Psalm 13:1](#), where David cries out,

How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever?

Here, understanding the Hebrew word clarifies that the Bible is not saying that God actually forgets about people. Rather, this verse is describing how God *seems* to be acting, as David perceives it. When you’re in despair, it’s hard not to feel sometimes like God has “forgotten” you, even though you know he hasn’t.

Remembering the Sabbath

Look at [Exodus 20:8](#) when God gives Israel the command to “remember the Sabbath day.” Here, it means to observe the Sabbath, to celebrate it by setting it apart from ordinary life.

When the commandments are listed again later in Deuteronomy, the Sabbath command specifies that they are to remember how God set them free from slavery in Egypt. In Jewish thought, the exodus from Egypt was the key event in establishing Israel as a nation. God released them from not just physical slavery, but spiritual slavery to idols and demons. They were to celebrate by resting from being “enslaved” to labor, by enjoying a mini-Exodus each week.

Take a look at [Deuteronomy 5:12-15](#). Notice how Deuteronomy 5 specifically prohibits people from having anyone else serve them on that day. All servants, slaves, and even animals must be released from their labors! People are to *remember* how God redeemed them from unending servitude by extending this wonderful rest to others.

“Remembering” here and elsewhere really describes a deliberate act of *living out a memory* by commemorating and memorializing an event. By re-enacting a memory again and again, you continually make it real to yourself and others. How do you “remember” your faith in Christ in this way?

For Reflection

Consider [Luke 12:6-7](#), where Jesus talks about how God doesn't forget the sparrows who are sold for a few pennies. What does that say about his care for us?

After sharing the cup and the bread at the Last Supper, Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me." ([Luke 22:19](#)) How does a Hebraic understanding of "remembering" enrich Christ's words?

Clara Barton, nurse and founder of the Red Cross, was known for not carrying a grudge. When a friend reminded her about a hurtful incident, she replied, "I distinctly remember forgetting about that." Have you ever made a *decision* to forget about something?

Further Reading

Read [Does God Forget Sins?](#) at [OurRabbiJesus.com](#).

If you would like to read more verses where *zakhar* occurs, [see this link](#) at [BlueLetterBible.com](#).

CHAPTER SIX

Concluding Thoughts

I hope you've enjoyed this brief exploration of some of the Bible's rich, flavorful Hebrew words. Hopefully, these short lessons didn't simply serve as yet more "microwave" fare. Rather, I hope this book has been like a gourmet sampler that entices you to further explore a new, exotic cuisine. Has your appetite been whetted to learn more?

Personally, I've found that the very first word of Hebrew I learned started unlocking doors of insight into the Bible, and each word after that has cracked open yet other doors that I had never thought to knock on before. After a while I started noticing interesting wordplays and humorous imagery, as my ears became tuned to listening to the Bible speaking in its own native language.

Of course I'm not implying that you need to learn a whole new language to understand the Bible's message. What I want to show you here is that there is much, much more to be known about your Bible in its native culture and context. When you spend a little time digging into something as technical as Hebrew word definitions, the results can be immensely enriching.

Even if you never become a Bible scholar, every little bit of learning is helpful. It's just like artisanal foods—not everyone has time to raise their own vegetable garden and cook everything from scratch, but adding even a few fresh, local ingredients can make meals a lot better.

I'm guessing that after just these few lessons, you've started to acquire a sense of why Bible translations can be so different. You've probably also discovered that looking at more than one translation can shed light on a passage. And now, when you bump into “remember” or “hear” or “fear” in your Bible, you'll likely pause to consider the word's wider potential meaning. If you want to keep learning, I often post [articles about Hebrew words](#) at [OurRabbiJesus.com](#).

Exploring biblical words is only one of the ways I've discovered for delving deeper into God's Word. There are actually many other avenues to expand your understanding, like learning about the land, culture and history of the ancient Middle East. The Lord had a purpose for cradling our Scriptures in that time and place, and every detail we study draws us closer to him. If these five brief studies have ignited a curiosity in you to learn more about the Bible in its original setting, they'll have accomplished their purpose.

I've spent almost twenty years in this fascinating pursuit, and it gets better all the time. What I've found most enlightening is understanding the first-century Jewish world of Jesus. Why did God choose that place and time to walk on earth? What difference does it make that Jesus was Jewish for how we live today? Christ's powerful words become even more potent when we hear him as his first disciples did.

I've now written three books to share these insights, as well as one on Hebraic ideas in the Bible. More about them is below.

If you'd like to keep learning with me, come join me at my website: [*Our Rabbi Jesus: His Jewish Life and Teaching*](#). You're especially welcome to [sign up for my email update](#), where I share a couple of new articles each month. If you'd like to contact me about this book or my other writing, email me at Tverberg@OurRabbiJesus.com.

If this small ebook has been helpful to you, I hope you'll share it with your Bible study group. As the owner, you're welcome to print a copy for your own note-taking, but please [send friends to this link](#) to get the ebook for themselves. You can order a study-group version of this ebook with copyright permissions for printing up to 5 books.

AND FINALLY

A Little about Me

I've always enjoyed discovering the answers to head-scratching questions and sharing the "ah-hah" moments with others. For years I did this by teaching and doing research in the sciences, after earning a Ph.D. in biology. I grew up in a devout family, but it wasn't until I was teaching as a college professor that I discovered how enriching it is to study the Bible in its cultural setting.



I've since taken courses in Hebrew and Greek, and traveled to study in Israel several times. Ultimately, I left a life in academia to devote myself full-time to teaching and writing about Jesus' Jewish reality, exploring how his context expands our understanding of his life and ministry.

Over the past fifteen years I've written four books on the subject. My first book, *Listening to the Language of the Bible* (En-Gedi Resource Center, 2004), is a devotional guide

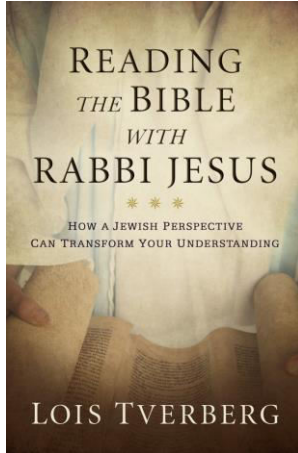
to the Bible's Hebraic ideas. A few years later I partnered with Ann Spangler, a best-selling Christian author to write *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* (Zondervan, 2009), which explores the Jewish setting of Jesus' ministry. Later I followed up with *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* (Zondervan 2012), which examines the Jewish context of Jesus' words that help us apply them to life today. Most recently I completed *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus* (Baker, 2017), a cultural guide to more authentic Bible Study.

I currently live in Holland, Michigan. When I'm not at home writing or out having coffee with a friend, I'm often visiting family, doing my best to be a loving daughter, sister and aunt. (Often people ask how to pronounce my last name, Tverberg. I say it "tuh-VER-berg.")

Please join me for my latest writing at [*Our Rabbi Jesus: His Jewish Life and Teaching*](#) and keep in touch through my monthly [email updates](#).

I also post regularly on Facebook. I put articles and useful links on the [Our Rabbi Jesus Facebook](#) page, and share personal updates on the [Lois Tverberg](#) page. You're welcome to "friend" me there.

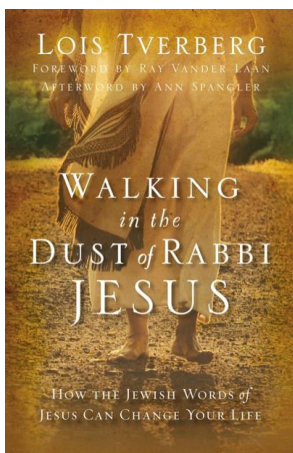
More Books by Lois Tverberg



[Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus](#)

How a Jewish Perspective Can Transform Your Understanding (Baker, 2017)

My newest book is called *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus*. It is a practical guide for more authentic, “artisanal” Bible study, with insights from Jesus’ Eastern, Jewish culture that equip Christians to read the Bible from a Hebraic perspective. The richness of Hebrew words is just one thing I talk about there. We also look at some important “big-picture” ideas within the biblical world that float past modern readers. With our new tools, we listen with first-century ears to how Jesus taught from his Scriptures, showing how he was God’s promised Messiah.

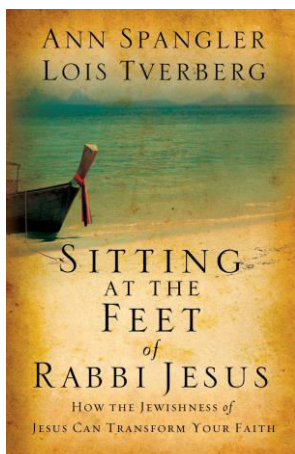


Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus

How the Jewish Words of Jesus Can Change Your Life
(Zondervan, 2012)

What difference does it make that Jesus was Jewish? In *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* we examine some of Jesus' most important words in light of their Jewish context, and ask what the implications are for us as his disciples. We look at Jewish ideas that deepen our understanding of Jesus' words and yield fresh insights on our faith.

Come eavesdrop with me on the conversations among the rabbis of Jesus' time. Discover how hearing Rabbi Jesus with the ears of a first-century disciple can yield practical wisdom for living as his followers today.

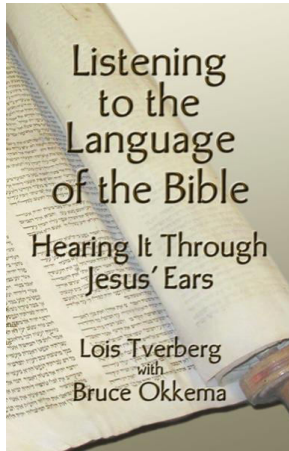


Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus

How the Jewishness of Jesus Can Transform Your Faith
(Zondervan, 2009)

What would it be like to journey back to the first century and sit at the feet of Rabbi Jesus as one of his Jewish disciples? How would your understanding of the gospel have been shaped by the customs, beliefs, and traditions of the Jewish culture in which you lived?

Here we immerse ourselves in the culture, prayers and feasts and history of first-century Jews and discover how they shed light on the message and life of Jesus. By doing so we enrich our understanding of the Bible and draw near to the greatest of all rabbis.



[Listening to the Language of the Bible](#)
Hearing It Through Jesus' Ears
(En-Gedi Resource Center, 2004)

A guide for discovering the richness of the Scriptures in their Hebraic setting. The book contains dozens of brief devotional articles that unpack the deeper meaning of biblical words and phrases. By examining the Hebrew and Jewish context of some of the Bible's seemingly odd phrases, it shares insights that clarify and deepen Bible study. It can be read by itself for an overview, or with a *Companion Bible Study* to explore the Scriptures from a Hebraic perspective.

These and other books are available from the
[OurRabbiJesus](#) book page.

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