

# New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus Insights from His Jewish Context

David Bivin

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Foreword by Dwight A. Pryor



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# Foreword

Dwight A. Pryor

Every year countless Christians journey up to Jerusalem from the nations to see where their Lord lived and died. With the assistance of Israel's outstanding guides, these excited pilgrims eagerly explore the land and the places where Jesus walked; they peer out their bus windows into his Jewish world, and they meet his brethren after the flesh, the Jewish people.

Invariably these faithful followers of Christ the Lord find their faith deepened by the experience of Israel – its Land, its People, and its Scriptures.

I know. More than twenty years ago, a journey up to Jerusalem forever changed my life. I came on an extended study tour of Israel that introduced me to a remarkable team of scholars living in the Land.

These men and women – both Christians and Jews – together were excavating as it were the words of Jesus preserved so beautifully for us in the Synoptic (parallel) Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Their collective insights opened a portal into the first-century Jewish world of Jesus that enabled me to see the Master in a brilliant new light. Not only was he the risen Messiah and Savior – known to me already in a transforming personal way – but he also was a Jewish rabbi or sage. Here in Israel I met the man, the historical Jesus of Nazareth. I encountered *Rav Yeshua* (the Rabbi Jesus).

The first Jerusalem scholar that I met on that fateful excursion into Jesus' Jewish world was David Bivin. He became a dear friend, a mentor and colleague in the continuing quest for new insights into the words, the wisdom and the world of the One we call Lord. Two decades later I continue to learn from David's perceptive research, and count it a privilege to sit at table with him, discussing the Scriptures and the Sage who taught them authoritatively and embodied them incarnationally.

In this stimulating collection of writings, *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus*, David Bivin offers you an opportunity that

few have enjoyed: He will be your personal tour guide through the multi-hued Jewish landscape that frames the words of our Lord!

On this tour you will glimpse the world of the sages of Israel, the great teachers of the Torah (Law), and the subtle and sophisticated teaching methods they use to explicate the Word of God. You will hear Jesus speak in his native tongue of Hebrew, and feel what it was like to be “covered in the dust” of this gifted first-century rabbi. You will explore the culture and better understand the context of Jesus’ life and ministry as a man, and gain precious insights into his pre-eminent and pervasive teaching: the Kingdom of Heaven (God).

Few guides are better equipped to show you these exciting vistas. Bivin’s insights into the life and times of Messiah are nuggets mined from a lifetime of labor, with scholarly skill and faithful determination.

As the Son of Man, Jesus was destined to go up to Jerusalem and be handed over to a Roman cross. But as a man, his mission from God was to raise up many disciples, teaching them the ways of the God of Israel and His in-breaking redemptive reign in the person and work of *Yeshua MiNatzaret* (Jesus of Nazareth).

This is the Jesus you will encounter on this study tour with David Bivin. It may change your life. It did mine. I came to Jerusalem as a believer in Jesus. I left determined to become a disciple of *Rav Yeshua*.

Reading *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus* will increase your love and respect for the man, Jesus, and summon your heart to walk after him in paths of discipleship. And that will be to the praise of his Father’s glory.

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Dwight A. Pryor is Founder and President of the Center for Judaic-Christian Studies in Dayton, Ohio and Jerusalem, Israel, and a founding member of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research.



## 2.

# Following a Rabbi

### Was Jesus a Rabbi?

By the time Jesus began his public ministry, he had not only received the thorough religious training typical of the average Jewish man of his day, he had probably spent years studying with one of the outstanding rabbis in the Galilee. Jesus thus appeared on the scene as a respected rabbi himself. Several passages in the Bible illustrate that he was recognized as such by his contemporaries:

And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he said, "Rabbi, what is it?" (Lk 7:40)

A lawyer asked him a question to test him: "Rabbi, what is the greatest commandment in the Torah?" (Mt 22:35-36)

And behold, a [rich] man came up to him and said, "Rabbi, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?" (Mt 19:16)

And someone in the crowd said to him, "Rabbi, order my brother to divide the inheritance with me." (Lk 12:13)

And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Rabbi, rebuke your disciples." (Lk 19:39)

Some of the Sadducees came up to him...and they asked him, saying, "Rabbi...." (Lk 20:27-28)

The diversity of those who addressed Jesus as "rabbi" — a lawyer, a rich man, Pharisees, Sadducees and ordinary people — clearly underscore the point. To understand the full significance of Jesus being addressed "rabbi," one must know what a Jewish teacher of the first century was and how he functioned in that society.

The term "rabbi" is derived from the Hebrew word *raV*, which in biblical Hebrew meant "much, many, numerous, great." It also was

sometimes used to refer to high government officials or army officers (e.g., Jer 39:3, 13). In Jesus' day, *rav* was used to refer to the master of a slave or of a disciple. Therefore *rabbi* literally meant "my master" and was a term of respect used by slaves in addressing their owners and by disciples in addressing their teachers.

It was only after A.D. 70 that "rabbi" became a formal title for a teacher<sup>1</sup> and thus cannot technically be applied to Jesus. A learned teacher of this time period is commonly referred to as a "sage," so that term is a very appropriate way to refer to Jesus. Nonetheless, the designation "rabbi" may still be more helpful than any other in conveying a correct image of Jesus to the average Christian reader, if it suggests that Jesus was recognized among the Jews of his day as a teacher of Scripture, and that he was famous enough to draw students to himself.

### **A Typical First-Century Jewish Rabbi**

From the gospel accounts, Jesus clearly appears as a typical first-century sage, or Jewish teacher. He traveled from place to place; he depended upon the hospitality of the people; he taught outdoors, in homes, in villages, in synagogues and in the Temple; he had disciples who followed him as he traveled. This is the very image of a Jewish teacher in the land of Israel at that time.

Perhaps the most convincing proof that Jesus was a sage was his style of teaching, because he used the same methods of Scripture interpretation and instruction as other Jewish teachers of his day. A simple example of this is Jesus' use of parables to convey his teachings. Parables such as Jesus used were extremely prevalent among ancient Jewish sages, and over 4,000 of them have survived in rabbinic literature.

Jewish teachers of first-century Israel lacked the sophisticated methods of mass communication we have today. Consequently the rabbis of Jesus' day spent much of their time traveling throughout the country, much like the ancient prophets, to communicate their teachings and interpretations of Scripture. An itinerant rabbi was the norm rather than exception. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of such rabbis circulated in the land of Israel in the first century. These rabbis did not hesitate to travel to the smallest of villages or

the most remote parts of the country. In some instances they would conduct their classes in someone's home, but often classes would be held in the village square or under a tree.

Jesus' ministry also followed this custom. Much of Jesus' teaching was done indoors: in homes (Lk 10:38-42), synagogues (Mt 4:23), even in the Temple (Mt 21:23; Lk 21:37). But we also find Jesus, like a typical first-century rabbi, teaching outside in impromptu situations. A picturesque account of Jesus teaching from a boat is found in Luke 5. The feeding of the five thousand occurred in "a lonely place" (Mt 14:13; Mk 6:32; Lk 9:12), and the Sermon on the Mount was so named because it was delivered in a rural location.

From the Gospels we learn that Jesus likewise moved from place to place a great deal, often accompanied by crowds. Mark 6:6, for example, records that Jesus "went around from village to village teaching." He traveled considerably in Galilee, especially in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee, and likely in Judea as well.<sup>2</sup>



### **To Earn a Living**

For all the traveling and teaching the rabbis did, rabbinic literature contains many prohibitions against charging a fee for teaching the Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> Because of these interdictions, almost all rabbis practiced a trade. Some were scribes, others sandal makers, leather workers or bakers. Jesus was a craftsman himself, according

to Mark 6:3, and Acts 18:3 notes that Paul supported himself by making tents.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that most rabbis had professions, they were not always able to support themselves as they traveled throughout the land. The traveling sage could not easily set up a shop due to the shortness of his stay in any given location. Nor would it have been fair when visiting smaller communities to take work away from a local resident in the same profession. Also, work could not readily be found for the large number of disciples who often accompanied a rabbi. Therefore the rabbi and his disciples were necessarily dependent upon the hospitality of the communities they visited.

A rabbi's stay in a community might last from a few days to weeks or months. Although rabbis would not accept payment for teaching Torah, most would accept lodging, and usually food as well, for themselves and their students. Jesus clearly felt that his disciples should be entirely supported by their hosts when out teaching. In one instance, he sent out disciples commanding them to take nothing with them, neither food nor money (Lk 10:4).

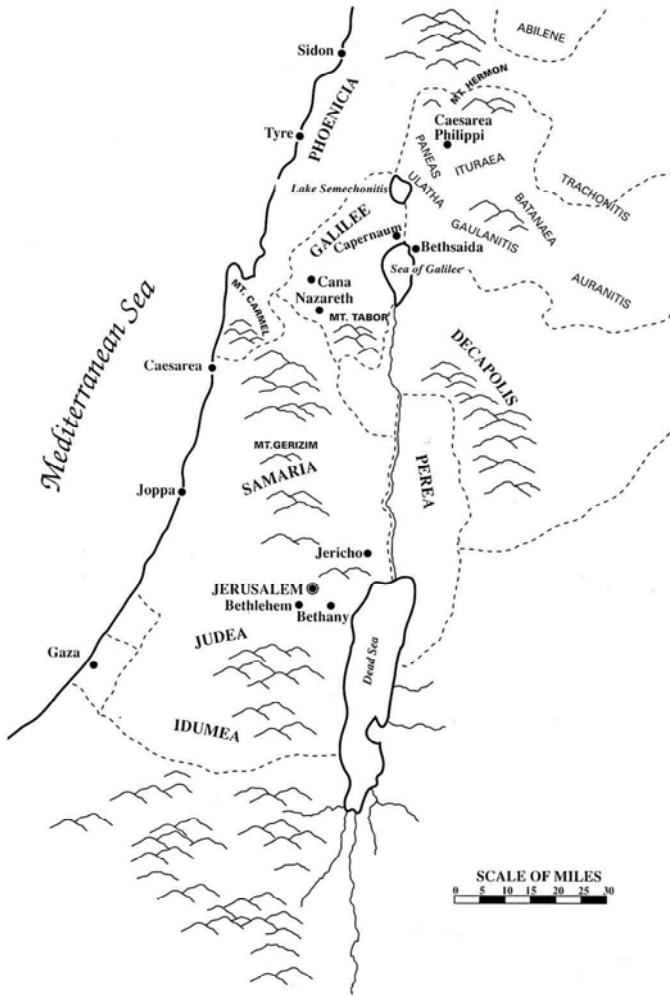
### **Covered in the Dust of the Rabbi**

A saying from approximately one hundred years before Jesus supports this picture of the rabbi in the land of Israel, and is remarkably descriptive of the ministry of Jesus:

Let your home be a meeting-house for the sages, and cover yourself with the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of this statement, "a meeting-house for the sages" should be understood to mean a place where the rabbis could hold classes, not a place where they themselves could assemble. Had people not opened their homes to the rabbis, it would have been impossible for them to reach the masses with their message.

The story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42 offers a good example of a family who heeded this injunction to be hospitable to rabbis and their disciples. Not only did they make their home



Israel at the time of Jesus

available as a meeting place for the rabbi Jesus, but Mary is described as “sitting at the feet” of the rabbi, and “drinking in his words thirstily.”

The words “cover yourself with the dust of their feet” in the rabbinic quotation have traditionally been understood to mean, “to sit at the feet of a rabbi,” to humbly learn from him, as Mary did.

However, these words might convey a different picture. For the long-term disciple, learning from a rabbi meant considerable traveling as well. One literally had to follow a rabbi to learn from him,<sup>6</sup> so if your rabbi traveled, you did too. To this day the unpaved roads of Israel are covered with a fine dust and as a result, when people walk along these roads they invariably raise a considerable cloud of dust. Any group of disciples following a rabbi would be covered with dust at the end of a journey, and if one wanted to travel with a rabbi, one literally had to cover oneself with the dust of his feet!

## **Making Disciples**

The rabbis were sincerely interested in leading more and more people to “take upon themselves the yoke of Torah,” a rabbinic expression for accepting God’s reign over one’s life, to live according to his will. To accomplish this, they trained advanced students as disciples, and they taught the masses. To “make many disciples” was one of the three earliest sayings recorded in the Mishnah,<sup>7</sup> and perhaps the highest calling of a rabbi. Often he would select and train large numbers of disciples, but he was perfectly willing to teach as few as two or three students. It is recorded that the Apostle Paul’s teacher Gamaliel had one thousand disciples who studied with him.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus, too, had many permanent students. We know about Jesus’ inner circle of twelve disciples who received special training, but these were not his only disciples. He called others to follow him, including Levi, a tax collector, who we read “left everything” to respond (Lk 5:28). In Matthew 8:19 we read of another man who was warned by Jesus of the price he would have to pay after he perhaps too quickly and easily blurted out, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go!” Two would-be disciples were rebuked by Jesus when they asked his permission to tend to important family responsibilities before answering his call (Lk 9:59–62). And Jesus also called a rich man, demanding that he divest himself of his wealth before becoming his disciple (Mk 10:21).

Luke 19:37 notes that near the end of Jesus’ life, a “multitude” of his disciples accompanied him as he entered Jerusalem. We can gain an idea of the size of that “multitude” from the number of

Galilean disciples alone – one hundred twenty – who remained in Jerusalem after Jesus' crucifixion (Acts 1:15). Jesus' twelve disciples spent years of intense study and practical training with their master. Later, they themselves were sent out to make disciples and pass on Jesus' teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Schürer (Vermes, Millar and Black, eds.), *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 2, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973), pp. 325–326.

<sup>2</sup> David Bivin, "Jesus in Judea," *Jerusalem Perspective* 2 (Nov 1987), pp. 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> "He who makes a profit from the words of Torah has brought about his own destruction," (m. Avot 4:5); "Do not charge for teaching Torah. Accept no remuneration for it" (Derek Eretz Zuta 3:3).

<sup>4</sup> Or working leather, according to F. J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 4, (London: Macmillan, 1920–33) p. 223.

<sup>5</sup> M. Avot 1:4. Yose ben Yoezer, the author of this saying, lived in the first half of the second century B.C., and was one of the earliest of the sages of the Mishnah.

The interpretation of "being covered in dust" as walking along behind a traveling rabbi, rather than sitting at his feet, is from Prof. Shmuel Safrai.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> M. Avot 1:1.

<sup>8</sup> B. Sotah 49b.

"Following a Rabbi" was adapted from the following articles by David Bivin, available at [www.JerusalemPerspective.com](http://www.JerusalemPerspective.com): "The Traveling Rabbi," "At the Feet of a Rabbi," and "Was Jesus a Rabbi?"

