



Kenneth E. Bailey: An Ambassador Serving the Middle East and the West

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Abstract

Kenneth E. Bailey (1930–2016) was an internationally acclaimed New Testament scholar who grew up in Egypt and devoted his life to the church of the Middle East. He also was an ambassador of Arab culture to the West, explaining through his many books on the New Testament how the context of the Middle East shapes the world of the New Testament. He wed cultural anthropology to biblical exegesis and shaped the way scholars view the Gospels today.

Keywords

parables, prodigal, exegesis, Gospels, Egypt, Beirut, Jacob, peasant, chiasmus, village, Syriac, Galilee

In the academic world only a handful of scholars have genuinely shifted the way we think and write. And generally this is either because of their native academic capacity or their unique position in the world. N. T. Wright typifies the former. And Karl Barth's position, witnessing two world wars and the collapse of nineteenth-century liberalism and European optimism, provided a viewpoint that few others could match. Academic capacity and position in history are two of the features that set a very few scholars apart. Imagine if one scholar has both.

On May 23, 2016, the world of biblical scholarship witnessed the passing of one of these great lights. Kenneth E. Bailey was a renowned New Testament scholar, but equally, he was a builder of bridges between the Middle East and the West. Bailey was known not

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only for his brilliant scholarship but for his service to the Arabic-speaking church. Over his lifetime, he wrote over 150 articles in English and Arabic. In addition, he published a long list of books, translated now into more than twenty languages. As well-known New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg wrote recently, “Kenneth Bailey became the premier commentator in our generation on the cultural world behind Jesus’ parables.”¹

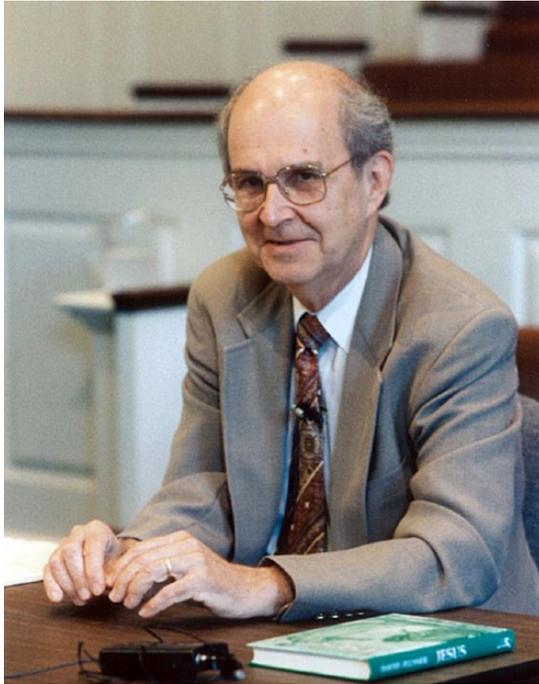


Figure 1. Kenneth E. Bailey. Photo by David Dawson.

Preparation

Bailey was born in 1930 to career missionary parents who served in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. He was introduced to Arabic when very young, so that his use of this difficult language was, as an Arab friend put it, “instinctive.” As a young boy in the 1940s, he was exposed to astonishing experiences. For instance, as the Nazi general “Desert Fox” Rommel was marching through North Africa with his famed Afrika Korps in 1941–42, everyone knew that his aim was the conquest of Egypt, where a large British army had dug in. Egypt was in full panic in 1942, when twelve-year-old Ken Bailey fled with his family to Sudan, West Africa, and then to South America. These dangerous events were etched in Bailey’s childhood memories.

Bailey later studied philosophy as an undergraduate in the United States before attending Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, in Pennsylvania. In 1955 he and his wife, Ethel, went to Egypt as mission personnel with the former United Evangelical Church. They continued

to serve in Egypt till 1965 in a variety of capacities with the Egyptian Presbyterian Church. He was involved in village evangelism, literacy work that employed the Bible, and education for Egyptian pastors. These years laid the groundwork for what would become the most fruitful perspective of his later academic career. His intensive study of the New Testament within the cultural setting of rural Middle Eastern villages signaled to him that something was amiss with mainstream scholarship. Westerners were foreigners to the cultural reflexes that shaped the New Testament, which led to their often misrepresenting key features of Jesus' teachings. This suggestion was controversial because it threatened to undermine numerous "assured results" commonly accepted among scholars.

In 1965 the Baileys were reassigned to work at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut, Lebanon. After five years Ken realized that he needed more extensive academic preparation, particularly in Western theological trends, so he enrolled in a doctoral program in 1970 at Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. There he mastered the use of ancient languages beyond Greek: Syriac, Hebrew, and Aramaic. In 1972 the Baileys returned to Beirut and lived through much of Lebanon's devastating civil war. Because of that lengthy conflict, they eventually relocated in 1985 to the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, near Jerusalem, before settling in 1990 in Nicosia, Cyprus (while continuing to teach yearly in Jerusalem). Despite these moves, he traveled regularly throughout the Arab world.

Teacher

At NEST in Beirut, Ken's students hailed from a variety of countries throughout the Middle East. Syrian, Palestinian, Armenian, Iraqi, Sudanese, and Lebanese theological students—many from very small villages—became an audience that could test Ken's growing belief that the cultural assumptions of these students' *villages* likely held keys to New Testament texts we barely understood. He was doing informal cultural anthropology during this era and validated his discoveries by seeking out ancient texts in Syriac and early medieval Arabic. This research into primary ancient documents confirmed the cultural insights he was hearing in class and experiencing as he traveled throughout the region. Typically, he would summarize the work of the established experts, who simply had the Greek text before them and a skilled use of its grammar. Then Ken would casually refer to commentaries written in Arabic from the eleventh century by people who lived in cultures far closer to those of Jesus than anyone in Europe or the United States. Or he might cite Syriac sources that virtually no New Testament scholar could read. To say this was off-putting to some scholars is an understatement.

For instance, he wanted to know how *shame* operated in social contexts in antiquity. His students' remarks prompted research that led to new discoveries. Bailey's well-known interpretation of the parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-13) can be found in one of his earliest books, *Poet and Peasant* (1976),² which shifted the interpretation of this parable for countless scholars and pastors (though some reject it). The point is that Bailey's views were noticed, and he forced interpreters to revisit their assumed positions because he was bringing to the conversation things not heard before.

It was in this period that I met Ken. I was a twenty-year-old student at the American University of Beirut (AUB), there thanks to a one-year cross-cultural program at my University of California campus. Regular outbursts of fighting in Beirut interrupted AUB midway through my first semester, and so I wandered over to NEST to take some classes that might transfer back to California. I was a political science student and a new Christian, and NEST seemed like an unusual and interesting place. My first class there was with “Dr. Bailey.” He was an inspiration not only to me but also to countless other fortunate students. I knew I had stumbled onto something special.

We traded letters (yes, paper letters!) regularly and remained friends for forty years. With his encouragement I went to Fuller Seminary and from there to Aberdeen University to complete a PhD in New Testament. After thirty-five years as a New Testament professor, I think I still hope or imagine that in some small measure my efforts in the classroom represent a fraction of what Ken represented in his remarkable career. And I am not alone. The pastors who studied under his care, as well as the countless people who have listened to his recorded lectures, read his books, or heard him speak tell me how much they were shaped by what they encountered. His influence is recognized from Pakistan to Armenia, from Hong Kong to Boston. He lectured for Anglican church leaders at Lambeth Palace, to scholars at Oxford, and to gatherings of priests for the Vatican. His name on the marquee always guaranteed a large crowd.

Writer

Ken wrote about a dozen books, but as he taught me, what matters is not the heft of the volumes you produce but the significance of what you offer. Scholars recycle a great deal of information, and little of it is new. Ken had little patience for this recycling and did not particularly like academic conferences and all their posturing. Instead, he wanted to explore new territory that did not interest the academy. Many discovered him first in his little book *The Cross and the Prodigal* (1973, expanded in 2005).³ The book moves carefully through the three parables of Luke 15 and fills in the cultural contexts of sheep, coins, and recalcitrant sons. Chapter dividers employ Bailey’s own Arabic calligraphy to illustrate beautifully what is central to the story. And then the book ends with a one-act play in four scenes entitled “Two Sons Have I Not,” which was used in Arab evangelism. This book alone convinced readers that they had to enter a new contextual world if they were to properly understand Jesus.

The little book was stunning. Pastors who read it—and today they number in the tens of thousands—never preached the Parable of the Prodigal Son the same way again. Today it is rare to find a modern commentary on Luke that fails to refer to Ken’s cultural insights. He believed that Jesus was a serious and profound theologian. And he argued that the great themes of the cross were embedded where we least expect them. He believed that this parable was Jesus’ premier parable and that it disguised a profound teaching about shame, sacrifice, and restoration. In other words, the cross was native to Jesus’ message and not a theme imposed on him by later New Testament editors, as alleged by many critical scholars. In my last phone call with him, in April 2016, I complained about the parable interpretations given by Vanderbilt’s Amy-Jill Levine in her

new book *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (2014). Levine strips Jesus' parables of any theological purpose and often upends their meaning in order to score some social message. In the Prodigal Son, the young son is a victim of a flawed family system, and hope is found in the restoration of family. Sin, confession, and redemption disappear. "This is precisely," Ken said, "the very sort of writing I am against." I could hear his anger rise as we discussed it.

Cultural interpreter

The Cross and the Prodigal was just the beginning. In 1992 he published *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* and provided the academic scaffolding that surrounded his unique treatment of Luke 15.⁴ Then in 2003 he published *Jacob and the Prodigal*, offering a deft survey of the Jacob saga in Genesis 27–35 and applying it to the prodigal story of Luke 15.⁵ I think that this book was one of his most important and perhaps his most creative contribution. His last book, published in 2014, did the same thing to the shepherd theme. *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* reconstructs the motif of shepherding in Psalm 23, Jeremiah 23, Ezekiel 34, and Zechariah 10.⁶ And then the book studies Jesus' use of this shepherd motif in five critical NT passages (including Luke 15 again). For Westerners who know nothing about sheep and their care—and who want to understand the Bible—this book is essential cross-cultural reading. Ken felt that *The Good Shepherd* was his most important work.

Ken's chief goal was to show that cultural assumptions are always at work when we interpret the Bible. Every interpreter is using cultural assumptions. The question will always be, Whose cultural assumptions will control the meaning of a passage? The extensive work he applied to Luke 15 continued into a variety of other passages that received shorter treatment. In *Poet and Peasant* (1976) he laid out his methodology and then tested it on three texts. In *Through Peasant Eyes* (1980) he did it again with ten more parables in Luke.⁷ In *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* (2008) he provided over 400 pages of cultural studies on everything from the Christmas stories to five studies on Jesus and women.⁸

I remember once asking Ken about Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 14 that women not speak in the church (v. 34). It struck me as a contradiction, since we had so much other evidence of women serving in leadership roles elsewhere in the New Testament. Then, as a teacher formed by the Middle East, he told me a story, which in his view solved the problem.

Paul's world had a few similarities with rural Arab villages in this respect: women were generally illiterate, and most men were only marginally literate. Those who could effectively read and write immediately became leaders of the community. When Ken and his team spoke in rural Egyptian villages, the setting was the same: the elders were in the front rows, the men were behind them, and the women were in the rear. All of the men nodded courteously as Ken spoke, even though many of them did not understand a thing he taught. But the women seemed completely confused and presumed that the men knew everything. Soon disruptive talking and questioning came from the

back rows as the women tried to break in to the message of the American visitor. To paraphrase Ken: at Corinth Paul is not thinking about keeping the women from *teaching* (“the women should be silent in the churches”), he wants them to stop *talking!* He wants to bring order to the gathering (14:40) and to encourage these women (or wives) to discuss these matters at home (v. 35). This is vintage Bailey. By reconstructing the cultural context, we suddenly see the text differently, and a hermeneutical shift occurs. Paul is not silencing women; Paul is bringing order to a chaotic church where women were being invited into audiences for the first time and where public conduct required some rules.

Rhetorical analyst

A less-recognized feature of Ken’s work concerns what we call orality or rhetorical form. This means that, for less-literate cultures, the spoken *form* is significant in their teaching. This feature gives structure to sayings, which can then be easily memorized. For instance, Jesus did not say, “God did not create us to labor under Sabbath laws.” He said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27 NIV). This wording provides a delightful and clever symmetry (with key words ordered A B, B’ A’). But this is just the beginning. As far back as the Psalms and Isaiah, evidence of many such structures abound. Nils Lund’s book *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (1942) opened this topic broadly, but Ken’s work made a decisive contribution.⁹ He showed that intricate verbal structures are everywhere in the New Testament, not only in large sections of, say, Luke’s gospel (9:51–19:48), but also in the smallest parables. But these forms were not there just for the sake of rhetorical style. They brought meaning to the story. Jesus and the Gospel writers employ these forms and violate them to get the attention of their audiences in order to score theological points.

Such observations (now called rhetorical analysis) represent perhaps Ken’s most complex and controversial contribution. And it will take some time before scholarship renders a verdict on it. In most of his treatments of the parables, Ken provides outlines and background so we can see these structures. Once you see them, there is no going back. In 2011 Ken published what is perhaps his most challenging book of all. He presumes rightly that Paul was a trained rabbi with an intimate knowledge of his scriptures and the culture of the eastern Mediterranean. And in 500 pages he applies both his cultural insights and his understanding of rhetorical structure to First Corinthians and the cultural assumptions there. *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* is a masterwork for scholars who strive to understand Paul’s letter.¹⁰ And his explanations here will likely show up in commentaries for generations to come.

Academic missionary

Above all, Ken was a scholar who did not merely contribute to the mission field of the Middle East. He became another sort of missionary—an academic missionary—to the West. What he once called “Oriental exegesis” is simply a call to read the Scriptures contextually. That is, the controlling culture and context of the New Testament must be the ancient Middle East. And this context can be rebuilt from a judicious use of

anthropology, archaeology, ancient literature, and the cultural echoes still found in villages of the non-Westernized Middle East. Today we talk frequently and easily about “contextual exegesis.” Ken was ahead of his time and calling for it before the rest of us knew what it meant.

But I would say more. When a book like *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* (2008) sells about 75,000 copies, we know something is afoot. A movement has started. Almost single-handedly Ken Bailey restored the legitimacy of thinking about the Middle East as a constructive cultural source for the work of interpretation. In an era where the value of Arab culture is casually dismissed because of either conflicts with Israel or devastating civil wars following the Arab Spring, Bailey legitimized value and respect for these cultures. Plus he gave wide public recognition to the writings of ancient Middle Eastern theologians who often wrote in Syriac.

Today Craig Keener at Asbury Seminary is a next-generation contextual theologian within this same tradition. Keener is prolific and has published lengthy technical volumes on the life of Jesus and the Gospels. His hugely popular *IVP Bible Background Commentary on the New Testament* (2012) has enormous sales among laity. I wrote Keener the week Bailey died, and he immediately responded, saying what a huge influence Bailey was on his own work. In a word, Ken’s legacy has not gone away but now is being expressed by a host of younger scholars.

But I also think that the final measure of a life and career well lived also lies in other places. Ken once told me that Jesus never wrote a book because in his day the measure of greatness was not found in the presumption of publication. The true measure of greatness was found in the students or disciples whose lives were shaped by what was done. For Jesus, the evidence for this stature is in the men and women who followed him. It is found in the 5,000 in western Galilee or in the 4,000 eastern Galilee who were fed on hillsides. Or in his ability to send out 70 disciples to the villages of Galilee. If this is the measure of greatness, then Ken Bailey was truly a great man. He was not only a devoted father and husband, a faithful follower of Jesus, and one who loved the Middle East for the duration of his life. But he was someone who inspired others to do the same, to inherit what he taught. He changed people’s thinking. Those who had an opportunity to hear him teach, even if only on a DVD, can see and hear a level of conviction, academic competence, and cultural sensitivity all combined with a spoken style that befits one of the celebrated teachers of antiquity. For him, as for the New Testament itself, how you spoke was as important as what you said. Ken had mastered both and in so doing drew countless thousands into a love for the cultures of the Middle East that will affect many generations to come.

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Notes

1. C. L. Blomberg, cover endorsement, *Jacob and the Prodigal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003).
2. *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

3. *The Cross and the Prodigal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973); repr., Brunswick East (Australia): Acorn Press, 2000); revised and expanded as *The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005).
4. *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992).
5. *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003).
6. *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014).
7. *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
8. *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008).
9. *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1942; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992).
10. *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011).

Author biography



Gary M. Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and Graduate School, Wheaton, Illinois, has actively supported the Arabic-speaking church, teaching in churches and conferences in the Middle East. He has written *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to "Holy Land" Theology* (SPCK/Baker, 2010) and *Whose Land? Whose Promise?* (2nd ed., Pilgrim Press, 2013), a historical study of the Israel/Palestine conflict.