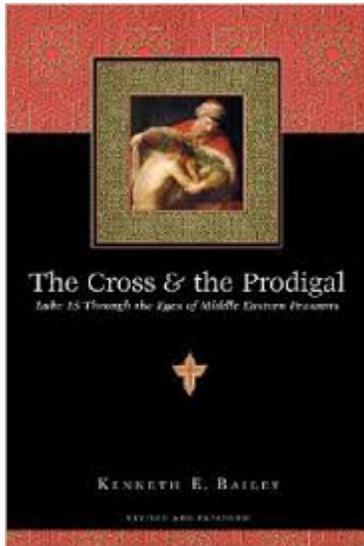


May 24, 2016

## Kenneth E. Bailey, 1930--2016

In the 1970s a friend gave me a copy of **Kenneth Bailey's** *The Cross and the Prodigal*. I was blown away. It transformed my understanding of how to read the New Testament. Later I devoured *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*. Bailey's basic thesis was that Middle Eastern peasant culture changes only very slowly. So if we want to understand the world that Jesus lived in, we should get to know Middle Eastern peasant culture today.



As a missionary and a son of a missionary who lived in the Middle East for sixty years, Bailey had an exceptional opportunity to do just that. He told the parables of Jesus to peasants from Morocco to Pakistan and their insight helped him (and so us) gain new understanding that would be available no other way. Being fluent in many ancient languages also gave him a remarkable perspective on the New Testament that few others could match.

As testimony to Ken's notion that the peasant culture of the Middle East had changed very little in two thousand years, I remember telling a friend from our church about Ken's understanding that **Jesus was born** in a home, not a barn. I told her that typical houses of that time had a place for animals inside the home to provide warmth for the family and protect the livestock from thieves. As I described all this and the raised area for family living, her eyes got huge. "That's the kind of house I grew up in!" Her family had been missionaries among peasants in Syria. You can still find such homes there today.

When I found out that his seminal book, *The Cross and the Prodigal*, had gone out of print in the U.S., I contacted Ken about publishing a new edition, which he was very happy to do. This led to me working with him on a half dozen books including *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* and his last book *The Good Shepherd*.



I have fond memories of meeting Ken, his wife and daughter in his home in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, where he eagerly showed me his private collection of antique books and Middle Eastern artifacts. Like a proud father he handed me one of his babies, a stone object I couldn't quite identify. "That," he said, "is from the era of Moses. And this one," handing me another, "is from the time of Jeremiah!" Did he really want me to handle these ancient "children" of his? Apparently.

At dinner he told me of growing up in Egypt in the 1930s. As Rommel's army was closing in on Cairo in 1942, government officials told the missionaries, "We can't tell you what to do, but we are burning all our papers and evacuating." So over the next couple weeks as a twelve-year-old he had the adventure (to him, to his parents it was a dread ordeal) of flying south to Khartoum, west across Africa and then on to Brazil before flying north to the U.S. All to avoid Nazi controlled territory. Since then he had lived through several other wars.

Ken died May 23, 2016. He was an extraordinary Christian gentleman. One of my great privileges as an editor was to work with him and help spread his valuable work to thousands of others. His insight, integrity and friendship will be deeply missed.

Posted by Andy Le Peau at [11:37 AM](#) | [Comments](#)