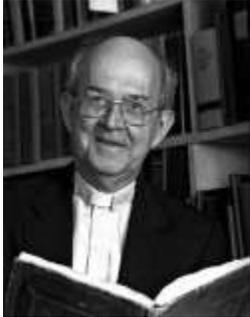


Kenneth Bailey: A scholar with a new way of looking at the New Testament

October 28, 2016 by [Michael Parker](#) [Leave a Comment](#)



Ken Bailey

Guest commentary

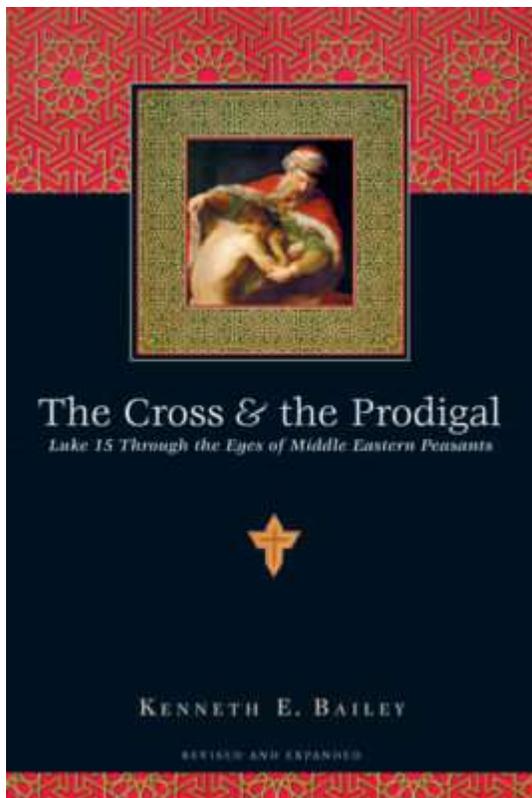
At a General Assembly luncheon in Birmingham, Alabama, in 2006, the then executive presbyter of Shenango Presbytery, David Dawson, introduced Kenneth E. Bailey as “the most important New Testament scholar in our generation.” He recalled this introduction at Bailey’s memorial service in California last May, admitting that at the time “it seemed rather extravagant.” But then he observed that five years before Jim Walther, a New Testament scholar at Pittsburgh Seminary, had said, “Ken’s work will be discovered and become widely influential fifty years from now.”

Bailey, who died at the age of 85 on May 26, 2016, was a Presbyterian mission worker who spent 40 years in the Middle East. He was born in 1930 to Presbyterian missionaries, and he spent his early youth in Cairo where he absorbed the Arabic language and culture. In 1942 at the age of 12, he and his family fled Egypt as Erwin Rommel’s Panzer tanks rumbled toward Cairo. After receiving a B.A. in philosophy at Monmouth College in Illinois and an M. Div. from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, Bailey married Ethel Jean Milligan, a microbiologist who worked with Jonas Salk to produce the first polio vaccine. The newly married couple traveled as Presbyterian mission workers to Egypt in 1955.

Working in the villages of Upper Egypt, Bailey continued to observe and learn the Arabic culture. Later he served as a teacher at the Pre-theological Program of Cairo’s Evangelical Seminary in the Upper Egyptian city of Assiut. In 1965 the Baileys moved to Beirut, Lebanon, where Ken taught at the Near East School of Theology (NEST). In 1970 the Baileys returned to the U.S., and Ken began a New Testament doctoral program at Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis. Having already mastered Arabic, he then acquired fluency in Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac.

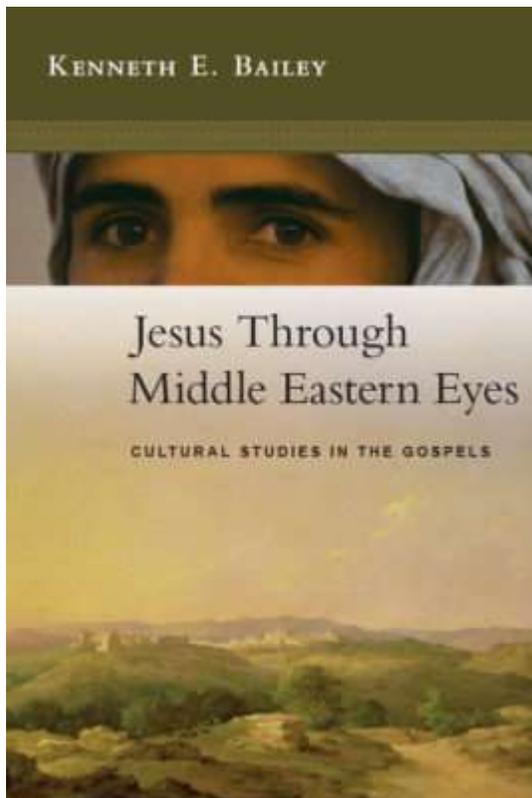
The Baileys returned to Beirut in 1972 where Ken took up his work as a New Testament scholar at NEST, heading the biblical department. Through much of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), the Baileys remained in Beirut. In addition to Ken and his wife Ethel, the Bailey family now also included a son, David, and a daughter, Sara. In 1985 the Baileys moved to Jerusalem; and from 1990 to 1995 they were based in Nicosia, Cyprus. Ken and Ethel retired in 1995 to New Wilmington, Pennsylvania.

During his retirement, Bailey was much in demand as a speaker, delivering lectures across the world: from NEST in Beirut, to Oxford University in England, to Fuller Theological Seminary in California. Dawson estimates that he averaged 150 lectures a year. He also wrote over 150 articles, 10 books, and the script for a Cairo-produced film, "Finding the Lost."



Bailey's first and perhaps most well-known book was "[The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants](#)," first published in 1973 and revised and expanded in 2005. In the introduction to the revised edition, Bailey laments the near invisibility of Arab Christians in the West today. Though "there are more Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East than Jews in the entire world," he explains, most Westerners continue to think that all Arabs are Muslims. This is a tragedy for Western scholars of the Bible as the traditional languages of their Middle Eastern counterparts (Syriac, Coptic and Arabic) are generally unknown in the West. Though Western biblical scholars learn Hebrew and Greek, for 1,500 years they have been cut off from Eastern scholars who, Bailey writes, "are inheritors of the traditional culture of the Middle East and thereby the culture of the Bible."

In “The Cross & the Prodigal” and in all the books that followed, Bailey attempted to fill this lacuna in biblical scholarship by analyzing the stories of the Bible in terms of Middle Eastern culture as he learned and experienced it over the course of his long career. He also shared these stories with Middle Easterners in classrooms and villages in order to test his ideas and gain new insights. In addition, he studied medieval translations of the Bible in Syriac, Coptic and Arabic; examined Hebrew sources such as the Babylonian Talmud and the Midrash Rabbah; and consulted Arabic Christian scholars (both medieval writers such as Ibn al-Tayyib and modern writers such as Matta al-Miskin) to tap into their cultural observations as well.



Bailey's most important book may be “[Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels](#),” published in 2008. This is not a thorough commentary on the Gospels; rather, Bailey gives prominence to those aspects of the Gospel story that have been misunderstood or overlooked because of Western ignorance of Middle Eastern culture. He begins by completely debunking the traditional Christmas story. By his reckoning, Joseph and Mary did not arrive late at night in Bethlehem, Jesus was not born in a stable or a cave and there was no heartless innkeeper denying a pregnant woman a room in his establishment. Instead, Joseph and Mary were comfortably situated in a typical Palestinian village home in a room usually reserved for animals.

“Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes” contains many other surprises. What may be most dazzling to scholars is Bailey’s observation that many of the parables that Jesus told have a literary structure called “ring composition” or “chiasm” and contain several

different examples of Hebrew parallelisms and other patterns that scholars have generally overlooked. Bailey believes that these are probably attributable to Jesus himself as the structures are often interrupted by the Gospel writers to provide explanatory comments for a non-Jewish audience. In addition to highlighting the parables of the Gospels, Bailey also presents the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, various events in Jesus' life and Jesus' interaction with women – all the while providing key cultural insights that bring fresh meaning to well-worn biblical texts.

Bailey's last book was "[The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament](#)," published in 2014. In it, Bailey's understanding of shepherding in the Holy Land as well as the development of the theme of the Good Shepherd from the time of David, through the prophets, to Jesus and the Apostle Peter is on full display. We see here the incarnation, the feminine side of God's nature, the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and once again the use of chiasm and parallelism.

One of the most striking commentaries in the book was on Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, who sought the one lost sheep even though it meant endangering the other 99, Bailey explains, by leaving them unprotected in the field. How else, he asks, could the individual sheep feel secure unless they knew that the shepherd would not leave them to die alone should they become lost? Bailey contrasts the Good Shepherd's risky behavior for the sake of one sheep with that of 20th century dictators who, hardened by utilitarian ideologies, were willing to sacrifice millions to promote their versions of "the greater good." Seen in this light, who would not be awed and humbled by the Shepherd's extravagant individualism?

Bailey's insights enrich and deepen our understanding of the New Testament while confirming essential, time-honored evangelical truths. Like the sheep in the 23rd Psalm, readers of Bailey will lie down in green pastures, encounter still waters and find their souls restored.

