



Obituary: The Rev. Kenneth Bailey / Presbyterian Bible scholar, author of 'Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes'

Nov. 24, 1930 - May 23, 2016

May 29, 2016 12:00 AM

By Peter Smith / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

His writings shaped a generation's worth of Sunday sermons on the Prodigal Son, and they challenged the old Christmas-pageant trope of the barnyard birth of Jesus.

The Rev. Kenneth E. Bailey, who spent his career as a Presbyterian minister in the Arab world, is perhaps best remembered for what he brought home with him — insights into the Middle Eastern cultures and oral traditions that shape the Bible.

Rev. Bailey, of New Wilmington, Pa., author of 10 books and numerous scholarly and popular articles, died Monday at age 85.

He and his wife had settled in Western Pennsylvania two decades ago after retiring from the mission field. He had leukemia and other conditions.

During a fruitful "retirement," packed with lecturing and publishing, Rev. Bailey was an active member in the Shenango Presbytery, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Mercer-Lawrence county jurisdiction.

He served as canon theologian to the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, his Bible studies giving local clergy and lay people access to an internationally renowned scholar.

"Christian faith is based on fact, but not bare fact," Rev. Bailey once wrote. "The gospels are based on a

Middle Eastern interpretation of truth and given an authoritative insider interpretation of what events mean.”

“Ken was a giant,” said the Rev. Ralph Hawkins, executive presbyter for Shenango. “He approached his work reverently even if also scholastically.”

Rev. Bailey’s 2008 book, “Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels,” is “going to turn out to be his biggest and most widespread work,” he said. “And the title alone really gives you a beautiful summary of his life’s work.”

Rev. Bailey never lost his youthful enthusiasm for his subject matter, added the Rev. George Warner, former dean of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Pittsburgh.

He recalled that in their last phone call two or three years ago, Rev. Bailey spoke of studying the first thousand years of Arabic biblical translations. “Most scholars have never touched them. He was still being excited and sharing that excitement,” he said.

“He was humble without being cloying,” added Rev. Warner. “He had a good sense of humor and never took himself too seriously.”

Rev. Bailey defended the accuracy of the Bible narratives against those who said Jesus’ words and deeds were distorted by the time they were written down. Rev. Bailey said Middle Eastern oral traditions have rigorous standards of accuracy.

Rev. Bailey said the famous Nativity passage, in which Joseph and the very pregnant Mary find “no room in the inn,” has nothing to do with an abandoned family facing a no-vacancy sign.

They likely actually stayed in the ground floor of a family’s house, where animals took shelter, rather than the upstairs family quarters. No one in ancient Bethlehem, he said, would leave a woman in childbirth to fend for herself in a barn.

And Rev. Bailey wrote that Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son was layered with Middle Eastern cultural standards of honor and shame. The father in the story, he wrote, accepted unthinkable humiliation to reconcile with a son who shamed him by demanding and squandering his inheritance.

Some biblical researchers disputed Rev. Bailey’s cultural and biblical interpretations, but he was

respected by many scholars, and his research fed into countless sermons by pastors he influenced in writings, talks and videotaped lectures.

Kenneth E. Bailey was born Nov. 24, 1930, in Bloomington, Ill, but was largely raised in the Middle East by missionary parents. He graduated from Monmouth College in Illinois, then earned the equivalent of a master's of divinity at what is now Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, where he later spoke frequently.

He and his wife, Ethel, began missionary work in 1955 in Egypt, where he eventually taught at a Protestant seminary while learning Arabic along with local folk customs.

He taught at the Near East School of Theology until 1970, when he began earning a doctorate at Concordia University in St. Louis while studying ancient Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac.

The Baileys returned to Beirut in 1972 and stayed throughout Lebanon's civil war.

He later became canon theologian for the Anglican Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, and taught at Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem.

Besides his wife, he is survived by his daughter and son-in-law, Sara and Victor Makari, his daughter-in-law, Leslie, and grandchildren Cameron and Kelcey. He was predeceased by his son, David, in 2010.

A memorial service is scheduled for June 3, at 1 p.m. at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Mercer, Pa.

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