

Kenneth E. Bailey. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies In The Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008. 443 pages. \$26.

Those who have benefited from and enjoyed Kenneth Bailey's books interpreting the parables of Jesus over the last few decades will be grateful for this collection of studies of "grand texts"(21): Birth Stories, Beatitudes, Lord's Prayer, Dramatic Actions (Call of Peter, Inauguration of Jesus' Ministry, Blind Man and Zacchaeus), Jesus and Women, and finally studies of parables published previously but containing new material. Those who do not know Bailey's work have a real treat in store for them. Bailey writes clearly and gracefully, drawing on a lifetime of living and teaching New Testament in the Middle East. His writing brings surprising new insights to our understanding of the New Testament derived from a combination of his experiences in Middle Eastern traditional culture and his knowledge of not only First Testament and later non-Christian Jewish literature but also early Syriac and Arabic Christian studies of the gospels. Present-day traditional Middle Eastern Culture and early Syriac and Arabic Christian writings are largely unknown to most New Testament scholars. They require a mastery of languages most New Testament scholars were not required to learn. Bailey observes that Middle Eastern Christians have been called "the forgotten faithful." (11) Syriac is a sister language to the Aramaic spoken by Jesus and in the third and fourth centuries was the third international language of the church, along-side Greek and Latin. Knowledge of this very significant portion of the Christian family largely "evaporated from Western consciousness after the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451."(11) The more than 10 million Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East today are largely invisible. Over the last decade it has become imperative for Westerners to re-discover Islam as a sister religion of Abraham every bit as rich and varied, life-giving and dangerous as the other two sisters who claim Abraham as their ancestor. Bailey makes it clear what a fascinating new world awaits our discovery when we let him guide us into the life and millennia-long literary tradition of Middle Eastern Christianity. The lives of these Christians, lived in intimate relationship with Islam, has so much to teach us, and is of vital importance for us, who continue to be largely ignorant of and hostile towards this enormous portion of the human family. Bailey's commentaries give birth to fascination, and fascination may open our minds and our hearts to both the very visible Muslims and the invisible Arabic Christians.

This review can do no more than tantalize with a glimpse of the riches that await the reader. In his commentary on the Lord's Prayer, Bailey sets before us a wealth of new insights on the favorite theme of Jesus' use of the Aramaic *abba* in addressing God. He notes that while this is to some extent distinctive, it is not unique to Jesus. The First Testament uses "father" about a dozen times in reference to God, but as a simile (Ps 103:13) or a metaphor (Isa. 63:16), never as direct address. In the Wisdom of Solomon 14:3 we do encounter a rare instance of directly addressing God as "Father." This is the first word a young child learns in Arabic-speaking countries today, having been taken over into Arabic from the Aramaic, which was the language of that area before Arabic swept into dominance. There are at least three important additional things to say about Jesus' use of this term. First, while a male term, Jesus defined it in a thoroughly non-patriarchal way through his unforgettable parable of the Prodigal Son in which the father behaves in a way very uncharacteristic of human fathers in his culture. Bailey is forceful in declaring that attributing to the word "Father" in speaking of God meanings from human experience and culture and ignoring Jesus' redefinition is illegitimate. He quotes a 20<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian Protestant scholar, Ibrahim Sa'id, who observes in his commentary on Luke :

The shepherd in his search for the sheep, and the woman in her search for the coin, do not do anything out of the ordinary. . . . But the actions the father takes in the third story are unique, marvelous, divine actions which have not been done by any father in the past.  
(100)

Second, Bailey also notes that Jesus' choice of this Aramaic word signals a distinctive characteristic of Christianity in relation to Judaism and Islam. Jewish prayer in Jesus' day was done in Hebrew, not in the everyday language of Aramaic. By beginning the prayer he taught his disciples with a word from their everyday language, and by addressing God with a word common to all human experience, namely "father," Jesus was signaling the inclusive reach of his disciples beyond any particular human people or culture. The readiness in the New Testament to translate *abba* into the everyday language of yet another people, namely Greek (*ho pater*), helps to make this clear. For Christians, unlike for Jews and Muslims, there was no sacred language.

Third, lest anyone think that Bailey is out to denigrate Islam by highlighting an important feature distinct to Christianity, he speaks appreciatively of Islam's warning against using any human model for God, lest it lead down the slippery slope of idolatry. Of the ninety-nine names for God in Islam, Bailey notes that all are adjectives but three, and those three could only marginally be considered metaphors. This warning from Islam is particularly helpful for Christians; it stands against our own inclination to base our understanding of God as Father on our own experience instead of on Jesus' redefinition of Father.

Two further important features of Bailey's comment are worth mentioning. First, the attention he calls to early Christian practice in the use of the Lord's Prayer. He notes how some of the earliest church buildings were in two sections, one for believers and the other for catechumens. The catechumens were dismissed from the liturgy before communion. This meant that the Lord's Prayer was prayed only by believers. This signals the fact that this way of addressing God was peculiar to those who had embraced the faith.

Second, Bailey from time to time brings in a contemporary experience or something from contemporary literature that helps bring home the import of what he is saying for believers today. He opens his commentary on the Lord's Prayer by reporting a conversation he had in Latvia shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union. He met there a young woman who grew up in an atheistic family and was indoctrinated in atheism in school. Yet she had become a Christian. How did this come about? Bailey asked her. She told him that when she would go to a funeral, they recited the Lord's Prayer. She had no idea what it meant. But when freedom came, she was free to learn its meaning. By the time she found its meaning, she had become a Christian.

This example from the commentary highlights the many different ingredients of Bailey's reflections. He is especially zealous to introduce us to insights from the world that gave birth to Christianity but that has played almost no role in our efforts to understand the gospels for most of our history. He is also very attentive to the rhetorical structure of the gospels and individual teachings and stories, a feature of critical importance but that did not enter into the example elaborated above. And finally he seeks to communicate through his studies the importance of these "grand texts" for faith today. No preacher should be without Bailey books to draw upon. In today's climate of fear of people in the Middle East and Muslim world as a whole, his intimate knowledge of them and deep respect and love for them might become contagious. In addition to saving Christians from fearing and distrusting and hating people who speak Arabic and Muslims in general and thus losing our soul, we just might introduce into this toxic atmosphere a dose of the healing power of the gospel.

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