

Book Review:

Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels

By Kenneth E. Bailey (InterVarsity, 2008)

REVIEWED BY CYNTHIA LONG WESTFALL

Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes is appropriate for laypeople who are motivated to study the Bible, as well as pastors and scholars. Kenneth Bailey intentionally writes in a way that those outside of the circle of scholarly discussion can hear and apply some of the important insights and contributions that emerge from the dialogue. He is well qualified as an author, lecturer, and emeritus research professor of Middle Eastern New Testament Studies for the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. He lived in the Middle East for sixty years. His childhood was spent in Egypt, and he taught New Testament in Lebanon and Cyprus as well as Jerusalem. As we might expect or hope, he sprinkles his work with entertaining stories about his personal encounters and experiences in the Middle East. However, the “Middle Eastern eyes” of his title also include the Old Testament, and the literature that provides the context for the first-century texts of the New Testament, as well as the post-New Testament Jewish literature, and particularly the literature of the Arabic-speaking Christian world up through the modern period.

Some of the key texts in the gospels and several categories that are particularly enlightened by Middle Eastern cultural lenses include Jesus’ birth stories, the Beatitudes, and the Lord’s Prayer, which are central to Christians. Most will enjoy the opportunity to reconsider and ponder these wonderful texts from the perspective of Middle Eastern culture. He also focuses on Jesus’ actions, Jesus and women, and Jesus’ parables. A major contribution of *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* is the demonstration of the role that context plays in the interpretation, meaning, and application of Scripture. One of the primary goals of this specific book, as with his other articles and his scholarship in general, is to sensitize the reader to “the imposition of Western cultural models and mental attitudes into a Middle Eastern cultural world,”¹ Bailey argues that what has been considered among Western scholars to be objective interpretation is, in reality, subjective. The Middle Eastern cultural world, which is far closer to the first-century context of the New Testament than is the West, is presented as a more appropriate lens for reading first-century Middle Eastern texts,

Both scholars and laypeople will appreciate the way that Bailey brings biblical episodes to life and provides new focuses and perspectives in the stories. In a way, his description of parables as

extended metaphors reflects the contribution of his entire book. Bailey has effectively permitted us to take up residence in a Middle Eastern house so we can look at the biblical world through its windows.

His contributions speak in particular to the issue of biblical equality. First, it is vitally important for Western scholarship to listen to, evaluate, and assimilate the voices of non-Western cultures in biblical interpretation. It is even more imperative to recognize the Middle Eastern context of Scripture and respect the contributions of those in the Middle Eastern Christian world—they are arguably in a position to understand aspects of the first-century world better than those who come from Western European tradition.

Second, Bailey focuses on Jesus’ attitude, actions, and relationships with women. He concludes that, within the cultural context, Jesus and the gospel writers elevated women to a place of equality with men in the community that he created. In addition, he provides cultural and historical details and perspectives on women in the Middle East that bring the Bible to life and clarify, correct, and enhance the meaning of texts and the roles that women play in them, including the woman at the well (John 4:1–42), the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matt. 15:21–28, Mark 7:24–30), the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11), the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with oil (Luke 5:36–50), the parable of the woman and the judge (Luke 18:1–8), and the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt. 25:1–13).

While the book makes important contributions, Bailey’s heavy emphasis on “step parallelism” (chiasm) and some of the specific applications of the methodology are problematic. His parallels often appear to be strained under close analysis, and lay readers may either find this aspect of the discussion difficult to follow or more convincing than it should be. In addition, his translation of the texts seems inconsistent, ranging between utilizing idiomatic English to being formal equivalent and/or archaic, which is less accessible and less effective at bridging the gap between the two cultures. However, I do not hesitate to recommend the book. Bailey has brought some guest speakers to the table who should have been primary participants in the discussion of the interpretation of the Bible all along.

Notes

1. Kenneth E. Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” *Themelios* 20, no. 2 (January 1995): 4–11. Also found at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_tradition_bailey.html. In this article, Bailey states his methodology as applied to oral tradition: “We intend to present the concrete reality of our own experience of more than three decades of life and study in the Middle East among communities of great antiquity that still preserve in oral form much of what is important to them.”



CYNTHIA LONG WESTFALL is Assistant Professor of New Testament at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. She is the author of *Discourse Analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews: The Relationship Between Form and Meaning* (T. & T. Clark, 2006).