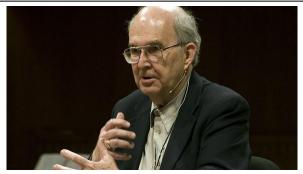


Kenneth Bailey's Inaugural Lecture At the Opening of the CMEC

enneth Bailey (1930-2016) was the son of Presbyterian missionaries and spent his early youth in Egypt, where he learned to speak Arabic fluently. After earning his B.A. and M.Div. in America, he returned to Egypt in the early 1960s to teach in ETSC's pre-theological program in Assuit. In the 1970s he obtained a Ph.D. from Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and spent the bulk of his academic career as a New Testament scholar at the Near East School of Theology, in Beirut, Lebanon. Bailey wrote a dozen books on the New Testament, including the *Cross & the Prodigal, Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*, and *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Much of Bailey's

academic work and writings emphasized the need to interpret the Bible in terms of Middle Eastern culture. It was Bailey's approach that, in part, inspired ETSC's Center for Middle Eastern Christianity (CMEC). When ETSC's president, Atef Gendy, visited Bailey in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2003 in order to discuss his plans for a Middle Eastern study center at the seminary, Bailey was immediately taken with the idea and



The Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey

promised to donate his personal library to the center. Construction on the center began in 2004, and the following year Bailey arrived to give the inaugural lecture, which is presented in full below. When the center celebrated its grand opening in April 2013, Bailey once again made the trip to Egypt for the occasion and presented another address. His 2005 lecture at the opening of the CMEC was a plea for continuing scholarship in the area of biblical studies from the perspective of Middle Eastern culture and history. Since Bailey's passion became the guiding vision of CMEC, it is fitting that his eloquent address be reprinted in ETSC's academic journal.

A Vision and a Journey

Dr. Kenneth Bailey June 1, 2005

In the name of The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen.

President Atef Mehanny, members of the board of the seminary, faculty and students, distinguished guests, pastors and elders of the Evangelical Church, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honor for me to be able to address you on this special occasion. My parents, Dr. Ewing and Mrs. Annette Bailey, spent forty-one years together serving

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the Lord here in Egypt. Ethel and I completed another forty years of service in Egypt and in Lebanon. Our daughter Sara has now served fifteen years in the Middle East. Added together, three generations of the Bailey family have served the Lord here in the Middle East for 177 years. I am especially overjoyed to be here this month because in June of 1955, exactly 50 years ago, I was ordained for the ministry with the Evangelical Churches of the Middle East. Therefore, it is an added delight to be present on the momentous occasion of the inauguration of the Center for the Study of Middle Eastern Christianity and to reflect on a part of its declared task.

If I may be allowed to rephrase the speech of Simeon I can say,

Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace for mine eyes have seen the inauguration of an institute that includes in its vision a study of the person and teachings of Jesus from a Middle Eastern cultural perspective.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. But that one step must be in the right direction or the traveler will lose his way and waste his energies. Worldwide, the church needs a new discipline in the field of the New Testament. It can be called "Middle Eastern New Testament Studies." There is no university, seminary, or theological college anywhere in the world, known to me, that has a department or offers a degree with this title. It is my dream that the center we today inaugurate will give birth to some form of this new field in New Testament studies.

For decades, learned specialists have dipped into this area of New Testament studies. But to my knowledge it has never been given a name and has never been recognized for what it is. It can happen here in Cairo, and it can be a blessing for the church around the entire world. Yes, the journey may extend for a thousand miles, but allow me briefly to suggest a direction for that crucial first step. To do this I would like to reflect with you briefly on my personal starting point for this journey and then turn to three topics:

- 1. The reasons for the journey
- 2. The often neglected resources available for the journey
- 3. Some reflections on the potential benefits that can flow from such a journey

Initially, when and where did my own personal journey begin? In 1957, after two years of full-time Arabic study, Ethel and I were privileged to serve with the late Reverend Samuel Habib in what was then called "The committee for fighting illiteracy." My assignment was to lead a staff of gifted young Egyptians as we organized and trained village leaders in how to conduct home Bible studies using their newly acquired ability to read Arabic. This was a "follow up" after a full year of literacy in the village. To carry out this task, we were resident in a village for nine months or longer. One of the first villages in which we served was Deir Abu Hennis across the river from Mellawi. The

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pastor of the Evangelical church then was Reverend Adib Qaldis, who preached to his people using an eloquent colloquial Arabic in a conversational style.

On one unforgettable Sunday morning, Reverend Adib was preaching on the story of the woman at the well in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. At that time the women of Deir Abu Hennis carried all their household water from the river in large jars on their heads. Naturally, in the church that Sunday morning, following village custom, the women were seated on one side and the men on the other. In his sermon, Reverend Adib turned to the women and said, "This woman went to the well at noon. Do any of you women go to bring water at noon?" The women together replied, "No." "Why don't you go to bring water at noon?" asked Rev. Adib. "It's too hot," came the answer. "When do you go to the well?" he asked again. "First thing in the morning and the last thing at night," they replied.

Rev. Adib continued, "This women went to the well alone! Do any of you women go to the river alone?" "No," came a chorus of voices. "Why don't you go to the river alone?" "It wouldn't be proper," was the joint reply. "What do you think of this woman who went to the well at noon, alone?" asked Rev. Adib. "She's a bad woman!" was the unanimous conclusion.

Seated on the platform of the church, I was totally astounded. I knew that these insights into the story, which were obvious to these simple village women, were not available in any commentary in the West. Pastor Adib was evoking out of these women what they already knew and brilliantly applying that information to the story.

That sermon changed my life. After much reflection, my studied conclusion was that there is a layer of meaning in the stories from and about Jesus that can only be unlocked by a more precise awareness of the Middle Eastern culture that informs the text. That awareness, I sensed, had been blurred and at times lost to the modern Church, both in the East and in the West! In the West it is lost because Middle Eastern culture is unknown. In the East it is blurred because of the centuries-old assumption that the Greek-speaking early fathers have completed the task of biblical interpretation for us, and our task is simply to repeat what they have said.

Reverend Adib turned on a light in my mind. I had no idea how I was going to proceed, but a vision was given to me and I knew that I must follow that vision wherever it might lead. I have now spent forty-five years trying to be faithful to that "heavenly vision." Thus, I am deeply grateful that Cairo Seminary shares that same vision.

We turn now to the three topics mentioned above.

I. The First is the Problem

How is it that the cultural cradle for the stories from and about Jesus has been inadequately understood? During the Cold War Winston Churchill described an iron curtain that had fallen across Eastern Europe. As we look across the centuries, it appears

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to me that in New Testament studies we are dealing with not one but four curtains. These are as follows:

First, the first is the council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). That influential council debated important theological doctrines. But those doctrines are not the curtain to which I am referring. As is well known, the aftermath of that council was a division of the Church that left the Greek and Latin traditions on the one side and the Semitic churches of the East on the other side. From that point in history onward, the centers of biblical studies in the West had almost no contact with Middle Eastern Christians and their perceptions of the Bible. Middle Eastern New Testament scholars had no voice in the Western discussion.

Second, in the early seventh century an "Islamic curtain" fell, and it was physically almost impossible for Christians, East and West, to interact.

Three, there developed a linguistic curtain, which few New Testament scholars have braved to part. In the last 1,400 years, who in New Testament studies in the West has chosen to learn Arabic or Syriac or Coptic? In the seventeenth century, John Lightfoot opened a new door by mastering Hebrew and Aramaic and using its sources for New Testament studies. In the twentieth century, T. W. Manson of England, Joachim Jeremias of Germany, Matthew Black of Scotland, and Joseph Fitzmyer of America are the exceptions that prove the rule. However, these brilliant men lived in the West and read documents. Sitting in London and reading ancient Chinese documents is not the same as living in Beijing, speaking Cantonese, and reading the same documents with the Chinese.

Fourth, finally comes the centuries old assumption that parables and stories are simply illustrations to help the slow of mind to understand real theology, which, we are told, is carried out in abstractions. Illustrations become the sugar coating on the theological pill, not the pill itself. In the process, Jesus remains the Son of God and savior of the world but disappears as the major theologian of the New Testament.

In general, these four curtains have hindered New Testament studies in general from understanding important aspects of Middle Eastern culture that inform the gospels. To this can be added the fact that contemporary Western Liberal New Testament scholarship is largely confident that Hellenism was sufficiently diffused in the Eastern Mediterranean that Greco-Roman culture is all one needs to understand the New Testament. They insist that no Semitic Middle Eastern culture underlies the Greek text of the New Testament and thereby there is nothing to investigate.

Looking at this same problem from another angle, I recall a very important lecture delivered by Fr. Haddad to the Near East School of Theology in Beirut in the early 1970s. Fr. Haddad was then the librarian of the Greek Catholic monastery of Deir al-Mukhallis, near Sidon. The weight of his lecture was to point out that Eastern Christianity in the early centuries had already hammered out its answers to the major questions that the classical world of Greece and Rome was asking. The Church in the Middle East was then

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overrun from behind, as it were, by a new community. That community brought a new sacred book, a new Semitic language, and a new set of theological questions. The Church, Fr. Haddad told us, had to turn around, face those challenges, and discover new ways to answer new questions. It did so over the next five centuries with great integrity and insight. But its efforts remain largely unknown and unpublished. Its heroes remain unhonored and unsung, including Dr. Mark Swanson's groundbreaking dissertation, "Foolishness to the Hunāfa'," which has yet to be published and given the weight it deserves. Father Haddad confessed that his monastery alone had 2,500 unread Arabic Christian manuscripts.

Many scholars today are aware of the Islamic learning that flourished during the ninth through the thirteenth centuries. Almost no one, however, knows of the parallel Christian scholarship in Arabic that took place during that same period of time. A significant part of that Arabic Christian scholarship focused on the New Testament and those scholars, such as Hibatallah ibn al-Assal, Dionesius ibn Salibi, Abdallah ibn al-Tayyib, Musa ibn al-Hajari, Bashir ibn al-Siri, and others, remain unknown, unpublished, unhonored, and unsung.

Arabic speaking Christianity began at Pentecost where some of those present heard the preaching of Peter in Arabic (Acts 2:1-21). To my knowledge there were no English, French, or German speakers in the room. Changing to a biblical image, we can say that you here in the Middle East do not need to go out and buy the field in which the treasure lies (Matt. 13:44). You already own the field! All that is required is that you dig it up and put its gold coins back into circulation.

II. Resources for the task

So much for the problem; let us now turn to the resources available for its solution.

First, there are the translations of the New Testament into Syriac, Coptic, and Arabic. Among these three, the Arabic translations play a special role because Arabic became the lake into which all streams flowed. Furthermore, translation is always interpretation. No Church tradition anywhere else in the world has the deep, rich heritage of translations of the New Testament that is available to the Arabic-speaking Churches here in the Middle East.

Textual specialists are not particularly interested in the Arabic translations because they often have brief comments added to the text. But if one is looking for how the text was understood by the church of a particular place and time, such additional comments are diamonds already cut, glistening in the sun waiting to be gathered along the path of interpretation. Having collected paper copies of all the translations into Arabic from 1592 to the present and having myself examined and acquired selected films

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¹ Published as "The Cross of Christ in the Earliest Arabic Melkite Apologies," in Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen, eds., *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period* (750-1258) (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 115-45.

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of Arabic gospels from Cambridge, Oxford, London, Berlin, and Rome, my own study has been greatly enriched by many such diamonds. Many more await discovery and exposure. It is impossible to over emphasize the importance of this unique interpretive biblical heritage.

Second, there are the commentaries. In these days, a new collection of the comments of the early Greek, Latin, and two Syriac Fathers on the New Testament are being published. That great work collates the reflections of the Fathers of the church from the late first century to A.D. 750. But what about Middle Eastern commentators from the eighth century to the present? Musa ibn Hajari's commentary on Luke was not included even though he wrote within the time span selected. Why? Probably because he is unknown in the West and only in the last three years has his commentary been translated from Syriac into Arabic—and even that text remains unpublished. Yes, Abdallah ibn al-Tayyis's commentary on the four gospels was published in Arabic over a hundred years ago, but it was not a critical edition and it has been out of print for decades. Hibatallah ibn al-Assal's collation of the Arabic versions from Greek, Coptic, and Syriac has been a center of interest for me for thirty years. It was completed here in Egypt in 1252. A team of scholars that I managed to put together has transcribed this work and translated it into English. Yet it remains unpublished! It is a gold mine into which I dip almost every day. I dream of the day the gold of that mine will be available also to all of you. Our own Ibrahim Said's commentary on Luke deserves to be translated into English and made available to the entire Christian world. Who is to care for these things?

Third, there is a Middle Eastern reading of the early Judaica. These works include the Mishna, the two Talmuds, the Tosephta, the early Midrashīm, and the Targumīd, some ninety volumes in all! These early works have been read and sifted for New Testament comparisons by the Germans, and for this we are grateful. But what about a Middle Eastern New Testament reading of these texts? Middle Easterners will inevitably see these early texts with different perceptions and note quite different connections with the stories of the gospels.

Finally comes conservative traditional Middle Eastern village life and its interpretation of the gospel story. Reverend Adib, mentioned above, made connections between village life and the text of the gospels. I think he knew he was handling gold coins. I am not sure he understood that these coins were unknown to the rest of the Christian world. How many more insights await us?

The Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo and the Evangelical churches that it serves are rooted in Middle Eastern culture. The most critical language for the task ahead is Arabic because most of the important texts are in that language. Only a church and a seminary deeply rooted in the Bible will care enough about its message to undertake such a task. In short, this treasure is buried in the garden around your house. It is on your property. If you do not dig it up, who is going to do so?



III. The Need for this Journey

Finally, looking to the future, why is this journey important?

First, there are the blessings that can come to the Evangelical community itself. For five decades I have seen the Evangelical churches in the Middle East select and translate biblical studies from the West, and that is good. I honor the Western scholars whose works you have found meaningful for your own life and witness. I also honor those who have translated and published these works. At the same time, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Antioch are the cities where our faith was born and where it first grew. These famous New Testament cities are Middle Eastern cities. To them we can naturally add Alexandria. Your own Evangelical tradition has already published biblical commentaries written by Ghobrial Rizkallah, Fahim Aziz, and Ebrahim Said, and because of his exegetical sermons, we can add the name of Labib Mishriqi. It is my prayer that this generation will also produce thoughtful commentators on the scripture and that this center will foster their theological pilgrimage for the upbuilding of the Evangelical church all across the Middle East.

Second, beyond our own Evangelical tradition are the Orthodox and Catholic churches of the Middle East. Quality biblical commentaries that draw on the Arabic Christian heritage of the past will, I am convinced, be used widely by those traditions and such works can help bring us together.

The third potential field for ministry for such efforts is the Global South. It is well known that 60 percent of the Christians in the world now reside in Africa, Asia, and South America. Research has shown that in those countries there are two million active pastors who have received less than six weeks of theological education. Who is going to write the commentaries for these pastors? Here in Cairo you are in Africa and yet your historical roots go back to St. Mark, and all that has happened in the name of Christ in Egypt over the last two thousand years is a part of who you are.

You understand the world of the sophisticated, highly educated businessmen and professionals that live in your cities. You also understand the world of village people who preserve the traditions of the past and are not connected to the internet. Your potential contribution to the emerging churches of the two-thirds world is enormous and cannot be calculated. Middle Eastern Christianity has deeper roots than any Christian community anywhere in the world. Your church is a suffering church, and this gives you a voice that you can raise with integrity among other branches of the suffering church. I am convinced that your unique Arabic Christian voice can give birth to a new renaissance in churches all over the world in ways and places that are yet unknown to us.

Finally there is the reality of what is called the "Post-Christian West." Jahu Henceles from Sierra Leone has eloquently described the contribution the Christians of the Global South are already making to the old and tired churches of places like Holland and England, where more than 3,000 new African churches have been built in the last twenty years. In biblical studies the sense of the sacredness of the Bible in many circles

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in the West is fading. Growing out of the rock-like commitments that you have to the witness of Scripture, your voice is needed among us. We in the West have once again become the man from Macedonia calling out, "Come over into Macedonia and help us."

To summarize: I have dreamed to see this day. Now I see it and am glad. For thirty years people in the West have asked me, "Who will continue along the path that you have opened?" My answer has always been that the Spirit blows where it wills, and I have never assumed that the vision given to me is valid for anyone else or that its value is related to how long it lasts. What matters is that I am faithful to it, not that I pass it on to anyone else. So this new center must be shaped by how you are guided by the Holy Spirit and by how you are obedient to your own calling. At the same time, I see a great unfinished task of interpreting the life and teachings of Jesus more precisely in the light of Middle Eastern culture.

One of the finest compliments I have ever received in my life was when the late Reverend Samuel Habib chose the title for a translation into Arabic of one of my books on the parables of Jesus. He called it *Amthāl al-Sayyid al-Masīh Ru'ya Sharkīyya*, b'qalam al-Qiss, al-Doktor Kenneth Bailey (Parables of Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes). You mean that ru'ya sharkīyya (Middle Eastern Eyes) is available from the mind and heart of this man with the Scottish name of Bailey? I was deeply moved when I first handled a copy of that book. But if ru'ya sharkīyya is possible for an interpreter by the name of Bailey, how much more do we expect an even better ru'ya sharkīyya from the minds and hearts of people with names like Fāhim, Hanna, Abd al-Masīh, Atef, and Emile?

The Father is sovereign and sits upon His throne. The Lord is risen and among us. The Spirit is moving in our midst. You have demonstrated your faithfulness in the past through wars and rumors of wars. As a church of saints and martyrs I pray God's special blessing on you as you venture as a church and as a seminary into this new endeavor, and to His Holy Name be all glory, and honor now and forever more. Amen.

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