

## Review Article

Kenneth E. Bailey,  
*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural  
Studies in the Gospels*<sup>1</sup>

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*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* is part of Kenneth E Bailey's "continuing endeavor" to "understand more adequately the stories of the Gospels in the light of Middle Eastern Culture". His stated intention is "to contribute new perspectives from the Eastern tradition that have rarely...been considered outside the Arabic-speaking Christian world". He hopes this will enable readers to "better understand the mind of Christ, and the mind of the Gospel author/editors as they recorded and interpreted the traditions available to them".<sup>2</sup>

The book consists of an introduction and thirty two chapters divided into six parts: "The Birth of Jesus" (Part One) contains chapters on Matthew 1 and 2, Luke 2 and Isa 60:1-7; "The Beatitudes" (Part Two) focuses on Matt 5:1-12; "The Lord's Prayer" (Part Three) examines Matt 6:5-13; "Dramatic Actions of Jesus" (Part Four) includes chapters on Luke 5:1-22; 4:16-31; and, 18:35-19:11; "Jesus and Women" (Part Five) has an introduction followed by reflections on Matt 15:21-28; 25:1-13; Luke 7:36-50; 18:1-8; John 4:1-42; and, 7:53—8:11; "Parables of Jesus" (Part Six) has an introduction followed by reflections on eleven parables, all but one from Luke.

Bailey weaves together textual, cultural and contextual observations, Old Testament and other ancient traditions, insights from his favoured sources, and anecdotes gleaned over a life-time spent largely in Egypt,

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1. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2008).

2. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 20-21.

Palestine, Jerusalem, Lebanon and Cyprus. The written sources he privileges include: ancient Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac and Arabic texts from the Old Testament, intertestamental and New Testament periods; post-New Testament Jewish texts; early Syriac and Arabic Christian literature on the Gospels; eighth and ninth century Arabic New Testaments; Arabic commentaries by Abu al-Faraj Abdallah Ibn al-Tayyib (d.1043 CE), Hibat Allah ibn al-'Assal (d.1252), Diyunisiyus Ja'qub ibn al-Salibi (d. 1171 CE), Matta al-Miskin (d. 2006), and Ibrahim Sa'id; and English publications by Lesslie Newbigin, William Temple and Daniel T. Niles. Rather than engaging "the various strands of debate in the Western New Testament Guild" which, he implies, are of questionable relevance to his intended readership,<sup>3</sup> Bailey deftly distils whole fields of scholarly endeavour to remove impediments to faith and understanding *and* draw attention to helpful contributions from Western biblical scholarship.<sup>4</sup> He often goes beyond the text, embroidering the gaps, spaces and silences of gospel stories, parables and historical records with imaginative accounts of what *might* have happened, what a character *might* have thought, and how a text *might* have entered, or *returned* to, the canon. At times, the distinction between the Gospel texts and Bailey's accounts of them tends to blur.

Bailey's renditions of Luke 4:16-31, Mark 15:40-47 and John 7:53-8:11 are riveting.<sup>5</sup> In each case, Bailey weaves all the jigsaw pieces we need to enter imaginatively into the narrative in an unobtrusive conversational manner that does not distance us from the story but equips us to participate in the narrative world more fully. His rhetorical presentation of Mark 15:40-47 ("The Burial of Jesus") and Mark 16:1-8 ("The Resurrection") contrasts the roles of women and men in the scenes so convincingly as to render his accompanying explanation redundant.<sup>6</sup> This is one of the few instances in which I found Bailey's rhetorical analysis helpful. Although I share his desire to escape "1,650 years of dominance by chapter headings and 450 years of subtle control by verse

3. The disjunction between biblical criticism and the church, and the need for biblical scholarship to serve the interests of confessional reading communities, have often been noted. See, especially, Walter Wink, *The Bible and Human Transformation: Towards a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Maiden MA: Blackwell, 1998); and Teresa Okure, "'I Will Open My Mouth in Parables' (Matt 13:35): A Case for a Gospel-Based Biblical Hermeneutics", *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000) 445-63.

4. So, for example, how he counters dictation theories of inspiration and the modern preoccupation with provable facts, and also his discussion of interpretive plurality and indeterminacy, Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 18-20, 397.

5. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 149-68, 195-98, 231-36.

6. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 196-98.

numbers",<sup>7</sup> I am not sure that replacing "the tyranny of the number system" with an alternative system is the way to do it. Bailey's rhetorical analyses are not always convincing and, as in his analysis of "The Parable of the Pounds", he sometimes "rewrites" the text to fit his model and then uses the results to claim too much.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the content will be familiar to those conversant with Bailey's previous work. What is new is its freshness and energy, its "readability". Several chapters are re-workings and condensations of previously published material with fewer footnotes, briefer structural analyses, and less laborious explanations of cultural points. Others are transcriptions of oral presentations to non-academic audiences.

Bailey hoped *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* would engage "nontechnically trained readers".<sup>9</sup> A personal anecdote demonstrates his success. Most members of my extended family read the Bible devotionally, none of them is formally trained in Bible Studies, all habitually flick through books they find around the house. Volumes on biblical studies usually elicit a roll of the eyes: "Don't know *how* you can read this stuff...." Their responses to *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* were different. Guests who picked up the book sometimes disappeared for hours, drawn into one story, and then another. The book occasionally departed with a guest and had to be tracked down: "I thought you wouldn't mind. Don't you have anything else to read? I'll bring it back after Christmas. Just let me finish the bit about...." Bailey's stories and reflections infiltrated meal-time conversations and became reference points for other reflections, "Remember what Bailey said about the widow and the judge? Well, it's a bit like..."

The need for such a book is obvious. It is difficult to find Middle Eastern authors in the bibliographies of major commentaries. The absence of Middle Eastern perspectives in otherwise excellent introductions to hermeneutics is alarming. *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* edited by Joel B Green serves to illustrate my point.<sup>10</sup> In a chapter called "Global Perspectives on New Testament Interpretation",<sup>11</sup> John R Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, emphasise the need for "First World" interpretations to enter into conversation with interpretations from other contexts and introduce students to the rich diversity of Latin American, African and Asian hermeneutic approaches. They don't mention the necessity and possibility of

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7. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 17.

8. See discussion below.

9. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 20.

10. Joel B. Green (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

11. Green, *Hearing the New Testament*, 329-48.

conversing with Middle Eastern interpretations – a curious oversight for texts that originated and were initially transcribed and translated in the Middle East. Middle Eastern perspectives are under-represented even within specialist publications that claim to be contextually and culturally diverse.<sup>12</sup> It is odd that social-scientific critics interested in “Mediterranean cultures” seldom seem to consult contemporary Middle Eastern biblical scholars, or those like Bailey who have significant Middle Eastern experience.<sup>13</sup>

In the pages below, I describe my first encounter with Bailey’s work and how it resonated – or didn’t! – with my own experiences of living in similar, although not strictly Middle Eastern, cultures. I then examine four aspects of Bailey’s approach I consider problematic.

#### On First Acquaintance

I first encountered Kenneth Bailey in 1996. I was on home leave from Afghanistan where I worked with a rural community development project. As was customary, my church invited me to preach. I chose the parable of the banquet (Luke 14:15-24) as the text for one sermon. A congregation member winked as he shook my hand after the service: “I see you’ve been reading Kenneth Bailey...” “Well no. Who is he? Should I read him?” And so the following Sunday I returned from church clutching a borrowed copy of *Through Peasant Eyes*.<sup>14</sup>

I turned eagerly to “The Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24)”.<sup>15</sup> What had Bailey written about the parable I’d preached from? There were many similarities between our readings but just as many differences. Bailey’s account of Middle Eastern hospitality resonated with my own

12. None of the contributors to Fernando F. Segovia and Mary A. Talbert (eds.), *Reading from This Place I: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 1995); John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison (eds.), *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999); and Fernando F. Segovia (ed.), *Interpreting Beyond Borders* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) have Middle Eastern backgrounds or write from Middle Eastern contexts. Naim Stifan Ateek, who describes himself as an Arab, a Palestinian Christian, and a citizen of the State of Israel, provides the lone Middle Eastern voice in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary A. Talbert (eds.), *Reading from This Place II: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Chapters by Naim Stifan Ateek and Christine Amjad-Ali, who writes about Pakistan if not from it, feature in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1991). Notice, too, the appearance of Charles Amjad-Ali, originally from Pakistan now working in the USA, in D. N. Premnath (ed.), *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2007).

13. There are two references to Bailey’s work in Jerome H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 143, 175.

14. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

15. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 88-113.

experience, but his assessment of the three excuses – “a bold-faced lie”, a “transparent fiction”, “an intentional insult...intensely rude” – did not.<sup>16</sup> I had heard similar apologies made, and had heard village women and men interpret them in more complex and nuanced ways.

My overwhelming impression was that Bailey described Middle Eastern culture the way my language teachers had described Afghan culture, painting a graceful picture of a devout, compassionate culture, a society that worked. My language teachers assured me that the only defence I needed against overly friendly men were two questions: “Don’t you have a sister?”, “Don’t you have a mother?” These questions, they claimed, would shame any man to retreat within the boundaries of decorum. If only! It didn’t take long to discover that I could not depend on people behaving according to cultural prescriptions. The world I experienced bore little resemblance to my language teachers’ glowing accounts.

Over time, I cultivated other (unpaid) tutors, the wives, daughters and widows of well-diggers, daily labourers and tenant farmers. When I asked these women about Afghan culture their explanations affirmed those of my language teachers. I heard a different story when I listened to their conversations, laughed at their jokes, and shared their joys and disappointments, the contours of their lives. These women inhabited a perilous world in which they were prey to constant harassment, which they sought to avoid but dared not protest about. My language teachers were not lying. The culture they described was the culture they (daughters of leading families, wives of influential men, tertiary educated) experienced. It was their class that protected them, not their questions nor their nation’s honour. If the cultural taboos that protected them existed for the poor, they existed only to be transgressed.

#### Questions of Culture, Dominance and Vulnerability

I now make sure I read anything Bailey has written on a given text, invariably find his contributions fascinating, yet frequently find myself at odds with both his general pronouncements about how “a Middle Eastern person” would feel or behave, and his interpretations of specific texts.<sup>17</sup> Our disagreements revolve around Bailey’s tendency to overlook dynamics of power and vulnerability and their effects on social

16. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 95-99.

17. I describe how my Bible reading changed in response to the experience of living with a poor rural Afghan community in Deborah Storie, “Reading between Places: Participatory Interpretive Praxis”, *Pacifica* 18 (2005) 281-301; see, also, “Dreaming Shalom”, *Jubilee Grapevine* Winter (2005) 4-7. (Available at [http://www.ascm.org.au/files/jg\\_2005\\_winter.pdf](http://www.ascm.org.au/files/jg_2005_winter.pdf)).

relationships. Most New Testament texts arose from *subordinate* communities whose well-being and survival were constantly at risk. And that, as we shall see, makes a huge difference.

The four interrelated problems I focus on here are: (i) Bailey's frequent failure to distinguish between public accounts and actual realities; (ii) his predisposition to view dominant characters in parables positively, often assuming they represent Jesus or God; (iii) his tendency to overlook violence in the worlds of and behind the biblical text; and, (iv) his lack of appreciation for how profoundly poverty and power disparities constrain the lives of subordinate men and, especially, women.

(i) *Bailey rarely distinguishes between public accounts (how people say things ought to be, what people say they do, how people explain their professed actions) and real situations (how things actually are, what people actually do and why).* So, for instance, when Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink (John 4:5-8), Bailey explains that Jesus

breaks the social taboo against talking to a woman, particularly in an uninhabited place with no witnesses. Throughout forty years of life in the Middle East I never crossed this social boundary line. In village society, a strange man does not even make eye contact with a woman in a public place.<sup>18</sup>

The fact is that Middle Eastern men, like the rest of us, very often do what they should not, a sad reality that Bailey illustrated in his earlier retelling of the Tamar and Judah story.<sup>19</sup> The "public transcript" of highly stratified societies never "tells the whole story", and is often "positively misleading".<sup>20</sup>

(ii) *Bailey seems predisposed to view dominant characters in parables positively and subordinate characters negatively.* He finds fault with the masters of parables in which Jesus and/or the Gospel writer explicitly direct the reader to view the dominant character negatively.<sup>21</sup> In such cases, he sometimes ascribes a degree of virtue and personal piety to the parable's subordinate character(s) for which the text provides scant evidence.<sup>22</sup> Where the text provides no *explicit* assessment of parable

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18. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 202-03.

19. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 38-49.

20. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 2.

21. In *Middle Eastern Eyes* this occurs in the parables of Luke 12:13-21; 16:19-30; 18:1-8; and 18:9-14.

22. See, for example, the near-beatification of Lazarus, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 387-93.

protagonists, Bailey sometimes goes to extraordinary lengths to defend the characters and actions of the dominant characters.<sup>23</sup>

Bailey's commentary on "The Parable of the Pounds" (Luke 19:11-27) provides a clear example.<sup>24</sup> Bailey introduces the parable by asking whether it needs "to be liberated from the presuppositions of capitalism that perhaps have unconsciously influenced our translations and interpretations of this story?"<sup>25</sup> He notes that the political quest sketched in the parable would be familiar to Jesus' audience.<sup>26</sup> The parallels between the parable's nobleman and Jewish vassal kings, however, extend beyond their political strategies (which Bailey notes), to their exploitative economic practices (which Bailey doesn't mention). Both Merrill Kitchen and Alan Culpepper consider the hermeneutical significance of the impoverishment and dispossession of the first century peasant population too great to overlook in any interpretation of the parable.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, Bailey (for whom the master represents Jesus/God and, hence, *must* be good) manages to avoid these connections. First, he takes slavery out of the picture by transforming the parable's δούλοι from slaves to servants. This permits him to describe the pounds as "generous gifts" and softens owner/slave into master/servant relationships.<sup>28</sup> This camouflages the power disparities portrayed in the parable and obscures the brutal reality of slavery in the ancient world.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, his translation of the master's command (v.13) emphasises the *process* of trading over its *profits*: "Engage in trade in which/until/because I am coming back." Bailey deliberates at length about interpretive

23. This is evident, to varying degrees, in the treatment of the following parables: "The Unjust Steward" (Luke 16:1-13), "The Compassionate Employer" (Matt 20:1-16), "The Parable of the Pounds" (Luke 19:11-27), and "The Noble Vineyard Owner and His Son" (Luke 20:9-18).

24. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 397-409.

25. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 397.

26. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 401.

27. R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, Reflections" in L. E. Keck (ed.), *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995) 3-490, see p. 363; Merrill Kitchen, "Rereading the Parable of the Pounds: A Social and Narrative Analysis of Luke 19.11-28", in David Neville (ed.), *Prophecy and Passion: Essays in Honour of Athol Gill* (Adelaide: Adelaide Theological Forum, 2002) 227-46.

28. Note that Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 405, twice refers to the noncompliant δούλος as "slave" rather than "servant". A Freudian slip?

29. On the nature of slavery in New Testament Contexts, see Carolyn Osiek, "Slavery in the Second Testament World", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22 (1992) 174-79; also Jennifer Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). On the interpretive significance of calling slaves "slaves", see Mary Anne Beavis, "Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16.1-8)", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992) 37-54; and Elizabeth Dowling, "Slave Parables in the Gospel of Luke – Gospel 'Texts of Terror'?" *Australian Biblical Review* 56 (2008) 61-68.

possibilities for the phrase ἐν ᾧ but does not even hint that the verb πραγματεύσασθε could be interpreted any other way. Thirdly, Bailey likens the risks entailed and faithfulness demonstrated by servants (*sic*) who conduct business in an absent master's name in an hostile environment (v.14) with the situation of the persecuted church in extreme communist and Islamic environments. Fourthly, he translates ἵνα γνοῖ τί διεπραγματεύσαντο (v.15) as "that he might know what business they had transacted". He admits that "how much has been gained by trading" is a valid translation of τί διεπραγματεύσαντο, but claims that Syriac, Coptic and Arabic versions all follow the same line of translation. He does not mention that other commentators consider "doing business" too weak a translation and prefer "turning a profit" to convey "exploitation in the service of managing profitably the capital at one's disposal".<sup>30</sup> All this prepares the way for the rhetorical structure Bailey presents for vv.16-19. Fifthly, Bailey's rhetorical analysis revolves around the master's commendation of the compliant servants as faithful, not successful, and the reward of greater responsibility, not privileges. He considers this conclusive evidence that the story is about "faithfulness to an unseen master in a hostile environment", not profits. This "evidence" only holds if the servants' accounts, which report on the *size* of their profits and say nothing about *how* they were made, are overlooked. Sixthly, Bailey rewrites the master's response to the non-compliant servant: "I understand that *you experienced me* as a hard man...." Convinced that "the *servant's unfaithfulness* produces a twisted version of the master", Bailey reverses the inference of v.23 to have the master point out to the unfaithful servant that *if* he were robber baron he would want the money invested for interest, but, *not* being a robber baron, he does not. Finally, Bailey concedes that it is difficult to explain why the nobleman (whom Bailey identifies with Jesus) orders his enemies to be slaughtered (v.27) when the Lukan Jesus instructs his disciples to love their enemies (6:36). He manages to read the master's command as "a statement of what the enemies *deserve*" because, as he rightly observes, "the text does not record what they *receive*". After all, "The wages of sin is death...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23). "In the Middle East," he informs us, "the word *no* is not an answer, but merely a pause in the negotiations."

Bailey's attempt to counter one capitalist assumption (that the master is only motivated by and concerned about economic profit) leads him to

30. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 678. See also Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (translated and edited by James D. Ernest (Peabody MS: Hendrickson, 1994) 3:150-51; Elizabeth Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

interpret the parable in a way that promotes the master's capitalist actions/expectations *and* protects the imperial structures he operates within/depends upon from any sort of interrogation. By focusing on the master's motives and his servants' faithfulness, or lack of it, Bailey keeps the human consequences of political and economic activities out of focus. He does not appear to notice that, even in its immediate narrative context, the contrast between the economic practices that Jesus affirms and those that the slave-owner expects is striking: Jesus celebrates Zacchaeus' declaration to give away half his possessions and pay back anyone he defrauds, yet the slave-owner commends slaves who accumulate wealth for him and condemns the slave who does not.

(iii) *Bailey overlooks much of the violence in the worlds of and behind the text.* Bailey's sensitivity to religiously and ethnically configured dangers is not always matched by sensitivity to otherwise configured risks. Notice, for example, how his commentary on "The Parable of the Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37)<sup>31</sup> dwells on the dangers of ceremonial defilement, imagining the priest assailed by fear at the thought of what his fellow priests might do to him should they suspect that he had served at the altar while defiled; the danger of the Levite "upstaging", and so insulting, the priest; and the dangers likely to beset a Samaritan who transported a wounded Jew into a Jewish town and remained there overnight. Bailey appears unaware that any traveller who paused to assist the wounded man risked encountering the only danger explicitly mentioned in the parable (v. 30): the danger of violent banditry.

Another example is found in Bailey's treatment of John 4:1-42. He begins by explaining how Jesus came to sit upon Jacob's well.

To avoid dissension between his disciples and the disciples of John, Jesus decides to return to Galilee. Pious Jews usually traveled through Samaria to avoid defilement, but for Jesus defilement came from within, not from without, and thus he took the shortest route, which was along the top of the ridge that passed by Sychar and Jacob's well.<sup>32</sup>

The gospel explains the situation somewhat differently. The gospel writer tells us that Jesus left when the Pharisees heard that he was baptizing more disciples than John (4:1-2). He doesn't specify *why* this prompted Jesus to leave. Neither does he specify why it was necessary (ἕνεκεν) for Jesus to pass through Samaria (4:3). No dispute between John's and Jesus' disciples is mentioned. We do know that John's disciples raised the matter of so many people going to Jesus with John, perhaps at

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31. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 284-97.

32. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 201.

the instigation of “a Jew” or “the Jews” (3:25-26). Although John’s response (3:27-36) is somewhat cryptic, he indicates that this is a cause for celebration, not concern. What we do know by this stage in the story is that Jesus attracted considerable attention in Jerusalem (2:13-23) and had reason not to “entrust himself” to people there (3:24-25), that “a Pharisee...a leader of the Jews...came to Jesus by night” (3:1-21), and that John had not *yet* been imprisoned (3:24). It seems more likely, then, that Jesus left Judea because it would have been dangerous to stay there and that, for whatever reason, Samaria was the safest route back to Galilee.

Two instances in which Bailey is attuned to underlying dangers are worth remark. Bailey draws on his observations of life under military occupation to explain why Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector, a “collaborator”, would be widely hated and would, therefore, live with fear:

Living on the West Bank of the Jordan River, in Israel/Palestine, for ten years, I discovered some of the tensions between the local Palestinian population living under military occupation and the Palestinian collaborators who worked for the occupiers. Collaborators did not mix in crowds. They were always careful about “their backs”. This problem would be greatly intensified for a collaborator who was short. What would happen to him if he dared push his way into the crowd? The quick flash of a knife, a stifled cry, and it would all be over. Only after the crowd moved on would the body be found and by then the perpetrators would have disappeared...<sup>33</sup>

Commenting on the “Parable of the Unjust Steward” (Luke 16:1-8), Bailey perceives the risks debtors would face should it become known that they knew that the master had not authorized their debt reductions.<sup>34</sup> He skillfully delineates the distinction between *public propriety* and *private awareness* to explain how the steward arranged conversations to his own and the debtors’ advantage without undermining their standing with the master or jeopardising their future relations.

(iv) Bailey frequently fails to appreciate how profoundly poverty and power disparities constrain the lives of subordinate people, especially women. This is evident in his discussion of Joseph’s reaction to the news that Mary was pregnant. Bailey rightly considers the common English translation of ἐνθυμηθέντος in Matt 1:20 as “considered/pondered” to be “legitimate but misleading”. ἐνθυμέομαι (also at Matt 9:4; Acts 10:19) is a conjugate

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33. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 177.

34. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 339.

of θυμοῦσθαι (to be furious/incensed) the verbal form of which occurs once in the New Testament where the NRSV translates it, "Herod *was furious...*" (Matt 2:16).<sup>35</sup> Bailey assumes that Joseph's anger was "the anger of *betrayal*" directed *at* Mary. However, if we consider the hazards that beset peasant and artisan communities in first century Palestine,<sup>36</sup> it seems probable that, until the angel advised him otherwise, Joseph *assumed* that Mary had been raped. It is instructive that Josephus's account of the Jewish delegation's description of Herod the Great's rule to Caesar included complaints about "the corruption of the chastity of their virgins, and the reproach laid on their wives for incontinency", violations usually concealed out of shame.<sup>37</sup> Josephus earlier describes how, following Herod's death (4 BCE), Roman troops attacked the villages around Sepphoris, enslaving many of their inhabitants.<sup>38</sup> Nazareth is around four kilometres from Sepphoris – which makes it unlikely that Jesus was the only young man from Nazareth with uncertain parentage. It seems probable, then, that Joseph's fury would be directed *at* Mary's unidentified abuser(s): Roman soldiers, a tax collector, a wealthy landowner, his administrator, his sons or his guest? Joseph's anger, I imagine, would be compounded by his own humiliating inability to protect his betrothed in a world in which peasant girls were violated and their violators not called to account.

Our second example takes us back to Samaria to eavesdrop on a conversation at Jacob's well (John 4:1-38).<sup>39</sup> Bailey rightly observes (i) that a woman would be unlikely go to the well alone in the middle of the day unless she were a "social outcast" and/or she wanted to contact travellers, and (ii) that, should a woman approach to collect water, courtesy required men to withdraw and remain some distance away. On *this* occasion, however, Jesus sees the woman and remains seated on the well, the woman approaches anyway, and Jesus (also alone) speaks to her, "Give me a drink." The woman neither ignores him nor (silently) gives him a drink. She asks, "How is it that you, a *male* Jew, ask a drink of me, a *woman*, a *female* Samaritan?"

Bailey acknowledges that the woman's response is "slightly provocative". He wonders whether her unnecessarily gendered language conveys an implicit question, but he cannot countenance the

35. The related θυμός occurs 14 times in the New Testament but only once in the Gospels, where Luke uses it to describe the wrath of the congregation at Nazareth who rose up to stone Jesus (4:28).

36. See particularly Richard A Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); idem, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

37. Josephus, *Ant* 17. 11.304-310.

38. Josephus, *Ant* 17. 10.5-9.

39. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 200-26.

possibility that Jesus' replies might follow a similar vein. Neither does he admit that Old Testament traditions construe metaphors ("the gift of God", "living water", "thirst", "spring of water gushing up", "eternal life") in ways other than those he suggests.<sup>40</sup>

If we recognise that the woman is walking a tightrope between life and death as she does most days, and if we remember that frank and forthright communication is a foolish luxury in perilous situations like this, we might begin to respect her need to veil her dangerous invitation with a semblance of innocence. "Euphemisms" that ostensibly speak about one thing while meaning another enable her to convey her message yet still claim "a perfectly innocent construction" should the man "grasp" her meaning and not welcome it.<sup>41</sup> She tests the waters a little more deeply with each response. Yet, even when confident enough to risk an invitation (v.13) she uses metaphors that permit her, if necessary, to claim to have spoken literally about water.

Jesus' response, "Go call your husband and come back" (v.16) is not what she expected. He brings the implicit sexuality of the conversation to the surface, showing that he *was* well aware of the sexual overtones of the conversation – and that he will not pursue them.<sup>42</sup>

Bailey judges the woman's reaction (v.17) to be "a prevarication", Jesus' knowledge of her marital history an embarrassment to her (v.17-18), and the change of topic an attempt to "hide her sin".<sup>43</sup> Is that really what the gospel writer would have us infer?

Luise Schottroff lists "perceiving greed as individual moral failure" among the strategies rich Christians use to evade the socioeconomic demands of the Gospel. This acknowledges the need for rich people "to change their inner relationship toward their riches" without questioning "their complicity in [unjust] economic structures".<sup>44</sup> A similar dynamic can be seen to apply here. Readers who take the woman's marital history and current livelihood as evidence of her (individual) sexual immorality see the need for such woman to repent without recognising the need to transform the structures and systems that deny them other viable options. As Gail O'Day observes, "Jesus does not judge [this

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40. On the sexual imagery implicit in this conversation, see Lyle Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well: Jesus, the Reader and Reader-Response Criticism", *Journal of Literature and Theology* 1 (1987) 167-83; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St John* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson/Continuum, 2005) 173-176.

41. Adapting methods described by Scott, *Hidden Transcripts*, 158.

42. Eslinger, "Woman at the Well", 171, 180.

43. Bailey, *Middle Eastern Eyes*, 208.

44. Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2006) 88.

woman]; any moral judgments are imported into the texts by interpreters."<sup>45</sup>

#### A Question of Perspective: Just add Salt

None of the above criticisms dims my appreciation for Bailey's work or my eagerness to recommend *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. What they do mean is that my appreciation for Bailey's cultural and other pronouncements is enhanced by a liberal dose of salt. The culture Bailey describes is the culture he experienced. He speaks the truth as he knows it. The truth he knows is related to who he is. He is post-tertiary educated, a man of the church, a well-connected elder of significant social stature, a resident in the Middle East with American/British heritage.... In his company, men are likely to observe taboos they might otherwise transgress. An unrelated man, he cannot share the confidences of Middle Eastern women. A respected guest, he is unlikely to experience the harassment and humiliation so often heaped upon the poor.

Privilege protects Bailey's sensibilities just as surely as privilege protected my language teachers from physical insult, just as surely as it protects me – and most others reading this review. Mary Ann Talbert is right to warn us that if we neglect to consider culture in relation to status we risk "mask[ing] a hidden agenda of privilege".<sup>46</sup> So, when Bailey writes, "A Middle Eastern person would naturally assume...", we ought to ask, "What type of Middle Eastern person?" When Bailey says, "A Middle Eastern person would never...", we would do well to read "*Most Middle Eastern persons would not want it known that he/she had...*"

Andrew Curtis proposes that we "'listen' to the way in which people outside the dominant classes read and understand the biblical story for their lives today".<sup>47</sup> Dialogue with their readings, he suggests, "will call into question the ecclesial priorities of the middle class church" and open our eyes to the biblical "priority of justice" for the poor and oppressed. And so we balance Bailey's view of the woman at the well by listening to a group of women at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological

45. Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections" in *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* Vol IX (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995) 491-865, see p. 567.

46. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Models" in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 255-712, see p. 58.

47. Andrew Curtis, "An Encounter with Ordinary Real Readers Reading the Gospels: Implications for Mission" in Teresa Okure (ed.), *To Cast Fire upon the Earth* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2000) 126-47, see p. 144. See also, Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

College enact her story on International Women's Day, 2004. As Monica Jyotsna Melanchton remembers the drama, Jesus meets a woman by a well and she introduces him "to a day in the life of a Dalit woman":

[Her day includes] domestic work such as fetching water and firewood, work in the fields of the dominant caste landowner, and sexual harassment, often violent, from both Dalit and non-Dalit men.... [She then] narrates her story of how she ended up having five husbands. She explains and each of her explanations is enacted as a scene.... She is not allowed by both law and the culture to divorce her husband. However, her first husband divorced her on account of her bringing an insufficient dowry. Another came forward to marry her but divorced her since she was unable to bear a male child. The third man who married her was an alcoholic who beat her black and blue every night, and she ran away unable to tolerate the violence. The fourth man was much older than she was and was poor and sickly. He died. The fifth husband divorced her for a younger woman.... Jesus, hearing the story, makes no moral judgment or condemnation.... The woman's plight is simply acknowledged as a fact of life that in no way denigrates her.<sup>48</sup>

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48. Monica Jyotsna Melanchton, "Akkamahadevi and the Samaritan Woman: Paradigms of Resistance and Spirituality" in D. N. Premnath (ed.), *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2007) 35-54, see p. 46.