



# The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants

*Kenneth E. Bailey*

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**The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants** Kenneth E. Bailey Honored in 2006 as a "Year's Best Book for Preachers" by *Preaching* magazine. Where is the cross in the parable of the prodigal son? For centuries, Muslims have called attention to the father's forgiveness in this parable in order to question the need for a Mediator between humanity and God. In *The Cross & the Prodigal*, Kenneth E. Bailey--New Testament scholar and long-time missionary to the Middle East--undertakes to answer this question. Drawing on his extensive knowledge of both the New Testament and Middle Eastern culture, Bailey presents an interpretation of this parable from a Middle Eastern perspective and, in doing so, powerfully demonstrates its essentially *Christian* message. Here Bailey highlights the underlying tensions between law and love, servanthood and sonship, honor and forgiveness that grant this story such timeless spiritual and theological power.

## The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants Details

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## From Reader Review *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* for online ebook

### Jeff McCormack says

I really enjoy Bailey's style, and this book was a bit less technical than some of his others, making it even more easy to read and grasp. He takes a relatively short story and expands on the underlying concepts and cultural understandings that the original hearers would have grasped when they heard it. He adds so much background story to it, that it really comes to life more.

My only complaint, and it is a relatively slight one in light of the whole story, is that Bailey kind of misses the mark in identifying the parties of the story. In identifying the prodigal son as just mankind, he misses the covenant significance behind it. The father figure is indeed representative of Yahweh as he points out, but the older son would be representative of the two southern tribes that were technically still within the covenant with the Father, with the prodigal son representing the ten Northern tribes who were not. Like the prodigal son, those tribes were cast out, dispersed throughout the nations, but they were promised (as seen in Isaiah, Hosea and Ezekiel 37, and elsewhere) that one day they were to be brought back into the fold. As we see this beginning to happen under the ministry of Paul, we see the building frustration of the Pharisees who were dealing unkindly to the idea, just as the older son in the story did.

But as I said, while this is a technical issue of sorts, it doesn't really alter the thrust of this book's underlying story, that of the Father's love even for the people who despised him beforehand, but were now returning to the fold. I just think that bringing in that identification would add a slightly deeper meaning to the story, as well as bringing in the connection and tying together the promises from the OT that were about to take place.

Even without that though, he brings out the extent of the Father's love, which bends over backwards in the face of cultural mandates, and acts in a way that is so contrary to the actions required of someone in the father's position, that it should bring the readers to a greater appreciation of what Yahweh has done for His people.

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### Neil R. Coulter says

On separate occasions over the last year, colleagues have mentioned Kenneth E. Bailey's writings, and particularly his insights into the parables of Jesus. So when I saw *The Cross & the Prodigal* on a friend's bookshelf, I grabbed it. I've dipped into it a little every day this week and finished it this afternoon (which happens to be Good Friday). Bailey lived in the Middle East for many years and uses his cultural observations as a foundation for understanding the three parables of Luke 15. He spends brief chapters on the lost sheep and lost coin, and then the bulk of his discourse is on the prodigal son. I found it an encouraging devotional read. Possibly his commentary has so affected Western understandings of the parables that now, decades after the original publication date, a lot of his comments seem like common sense. From what he says in the introduction, I gather this wasn't the case when he wrote the book.

The final section of the book is a short play script of the prodigal son story, which I think could be quite effective as part of a worship service, or just on its own on an evening in church.

## Loredelcarmen says

Un libro corto, pero con una gran enseñanza, no solo desglosa la parábola del hijo pródigo, sino también la del buen pastor y la de la mujer que pierde su moneda, yo no sabía que las tres parábolas van juntas, como una trilogía, y la del buen pastor también es la continuación del salmo 23, la de la mujer con las monedas se ve que para Jesús la mujer lleva un papel principal, y e el hijo pródigo destaca el amor de Dios para con nosotros.

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## Justin says

There are many theology books written out there. Sometimes there is a good paragraph or a great concepts, but every now and again, you get a book that will completely change how you look at Scripture. This is definitely one of those books. After reading this book, I will never, ever look at the narrative of the prodigal son the same way again. The book is short, but packed full of information. It is truly a life changing read.

The book doesn't only cover the prodigal though. It looks at all of Luke 15 and goes line by line with the analysis. I really appreciated that as well. It would have been easy to write just on the prodigal and would have still been a fantastic book, but the addition of the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep narratives were well received as well. The heart though is the prodigal narrative.

The reason for the 4 vs 5 star is simply, it is way shorter than you think. The last 3rd of the book is a play written by the author on the prodigal. It is good, but it was like having a fantastic meal that is just mind blowing, only to have a dessert which is good, but not as good, so you are left with an "eh" taste at the end of the meal.

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## Anne Hamilton says

*'Christians have perverted the message of Christ,' says the Muslim to his Christian friend. 'The story of the prodigal son proves that the cross is unnecessary to forgiveness. The boy comes home. His father welcomes him. There is no cross and no incarnation. Islam with no cross or savior preserves the true message of Christ.'*

So begins this profound book in which Ken Bailey seeks to examine this centuries-old Muslim criticism of Christianity. Having lived and worked in the Middle East for decades, he asked everyone in every strata of society he could find what the story of the prodigal son meant to them. He was particularly interested in the responses of peasants in villages who were able to fill in the necessary unspoken cultural detail. What was expected from each person - from the younger son, the older son and the father - in each circumstance is quite different in the eyes of Eastern people to those of the West.

Bailey draws his insights together to demonstrate his belief that the cross is indeed an intrinsic part of the story.

He finishes up with a dramatic play to bring out the hidden depths of the parable and explore the emotive reactions that remain invisible to western readers of the fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel.

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## **Dmccconkey says**

This is an excellent book - one I would recommend every pastor/ teacher should read. It gives the reader a different perspective of these parables, one from the eyes and ears of a Middle Easterner - roots in the culture and setting that they were spoken to. Too often we talk about being people of the Book when in reality we are people of what we have heard not what the Scripture says. Too often we are too quick to come up with a sermon or text or lesson and not spend the time in the Scriptures to listen and observe what is going on. Too often we come from our Western viewpoint and miss the truth of the Eastern story/message. Kenneth Bailey has written from his deep well of experience and study in the Middle East, study of Arabic, Hebrew, Greek and Rabbinic literature, plus a wealth of Eastern Christian commentaries and writings to give insight into these important parables. He also addresses the conflict with Islam over the parables and his response to their interpretations. This is a must read. Read it during a Shabbat when I was home sick but my soul was enriched.

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## **Dan Curnutt says**

WOW is all I can say. Dr. Bailey does it again. He gives us a culturally sensitive and correct exegesis of the three parables in Luke 15.

The stories will come alive as you dig into this short (145 pages) book. Do Not Skip the Introduction to the second edition or the Preface. They have wonderul tidbits that will make you stop and think.

Dr. Bailey has lived and taught in the Middle East for over 40 years. He is fluent in Middle Eastern Languages and has found, poured over, memorized and thouroughly studied Arabic and Coptic commentaries that are not available to the rest of us in the West because they have not been translated out of their original languages.

If you love the Bible and want to better understand the culture of the times that Jesus walked this earth then you MUST read this book and others by Dr. Bailey.

I can't recommend this highly enough.

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## **Paul says**

An amazing book that exegetes the parable of the prodigal son or rather prodigal sons in its original cultural context and to its original Middle Eastern villager audience. As someone living on the perimeters of today's Middle East the readings are convincing and where speculative are indicated as such but are very likely. The parable is also cited by Moslems to argue that the cross is not necessary that God can simply forgive. The author addresses these concerns convincingly looking at the Father's humiliation even raising his garments and running through the village to reach out to and welcome his repentant son.

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## **Terra says**

I am a huge fan of Kenneth Bailey--his time spent living in the middle east and seeking to understand the nuances of its various cultures and the implications of those cultures on the gospels and epistles is invaluable. This short work on the story of the prodigal was insightful and helpful but not among his best work--some of his points lacked adequate exploration. But on the whole, his insight that the story is actually about a compassionate father and his TWO lost sons is true and beautiful.

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## **Seth Heasley says**

When I read The Language of Science and Faith, the authors made the point that when we consider the cultural and historical context of a Biblical passage, we don't necessarily overturn the plain meaning (plain from our perspective), but we definitely enrich that meaning. As an example, they used the Parable of the Prodigal Son and referenced Kenneth E. Bailey's beautiful The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants.

When I say beautiful, I certainly mean that the book has some lovely commentary on Christ's teachings, but it also contains the script for a wonderful play based on the parable, and absolutely stunning Arabic calligraphy heading each chapter. For those who don't know, Islam discourages sacred images of any kind, including sacred figurative art. But using the pen to instead make beautiful "pictures" with words was considered kosher (or should I say "halal"?).

This book pulls back the veil on the deeper meanings of the story, plain to the original hearers, which have been largely lost to Western ears.

Jesus spoke to a Middle Eastern peasant people. Even the educated would have had their roots in that peasantry. What lies between the lines, what is felt and not spoken, is of deepest significance. Indeed, it almost cannot be expressed because it is not consciously apprehended. What "everybody knows" is never explained.

Full review on my blog.

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## **Ken says**

Short but captivating historical/cultural perspective on the story of the prodigal.

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## **Mark A Powell says**

Although our distance from it means that none of us can know the exact culture of Jesus' day, Bailey suggests we seek to understand it in order to gain a better understanding of what Jesus was communicating through His parables. Bailey draws from decades of being immersed in Middle Eastern culture to revealingly, and usefully, relate the truths contained in the prodigal son parable. (A four-act play dramatizing

the events of this parable is also included.)

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### **Norman Falk says**

La riqueza que es conocer el contexto de un texto...

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### **Owen says**

If I could I'd give this book 2 ratings. The first part of the book is a solid 4. Great teaching, unique insights and it really changed the way I understood that parable.

The second part of the book is a play based on the parable. It's heavy handed and a complete retread of what the author has previously said. I believe this play is intended for use as a drama/teaching program at a church or study group. I think it would have been better labeled as an appendix: optional reading.

In summary, a very worthwhile read. Just skip the ending.

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### **Dad Bowers says**

Bailey gives an excellent treatment of the old familiar parables of Jesus in Luke 15. His approach to see things thru the eyes of the Mid-easterner among whom he has lived for decades helps the freshness and interpretation. He seeks to show the drama, the rhetoric, and the grace of God in these finely crafted stories. His innovative play covering the last part was good, but it might seem better on stage than on paper.

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