

TRANSCRIPT

Rev. Todd Wilken, Host

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"The First Christmas"

Guest:

Dr. Kenneth Bailey

Author and Lecturer in Middle Eastern New Testament Studies

Author of *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*

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WILKEN: Greetings and welcome to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. Thanks for tuning us in on this Christmas Eve afternoon. Well, I've got one at home. Because we've got a few cats running around the Wilken compound, we have to keep the nativity scene carefully perched away from their reach, but there is one there. It's got a Baby Jesus, it's got a Mary and a Joseph, it's got some animals, donkeys and sheep, I believe, and then a few wise men making their way toward the scene, some angels. It's a stable, kind of a crude little building there, and it's all quite quaint. Is that an accurate picture of the birth of our Savior that we celebrate tomorrow as Christians? Now I don't want to do any revisionist history here but I think we ought to take a good, hard look at the actual text of Scripture in its cultural, historical context and say, "What did it look like when the angels appeared to those shepherds and sent them to Bethlehem to find this mother and this baby, the Savior of the world?" We're going to be talking for the next hour of the program with Dr. Ken Bailey. He's author and lecturer in Middle Eastern New Testament Studies. He spent forty years living and teaching New Testament in Egypt, Cyprus, Lebanon, Jerusalem, author of numerous books, including *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. He joins us to talk about the first Christmas. Dr. Bailey, welcome back to *Issues, Etc.*

BAILEY: Yes, sir.

WILKEN: As I look at that typical nativity scene that's laid out on the table in my house, how accurate is that scene I just described?

BAILEY: Well, it's got two really critical flaws in it, and that will be evident as we proceed. But I think that what we need to do to start off is to look at the six problems that are there, not in the text, but in our traditional understanding of them. Could I take a minute and review those, Todd, or how do you want to proceed?

WILKEN: No. Please do. That's a great way to begin.

BAILEY: Okay. First of all, you know, we see the story as a story about just a few people that are mentioned in the text, but in Middle Eastern traditional society no individual stands by themselves. That is, we come out of Descartes: "I am because I think." And they say, "I am because we are." A person is always a part of the community. We forget that this is Bethlehem. That means a community. Okay, so now Joseph is a member of an extended family that has its roots in Bethlehem. And all he's got to do is say, "I'm So-and-so, son of So-and-so, son of So-and-so, son of So-and so." And, "Oh, yes, yes, your grandfather and I were friends," or "I knew your uncle." I mean immediately half of the houses in town are open him.

And second he's not just from any family. He's from the family of David. Thereby he is what the British would call one of the royals. He shows up and recites his liturgy, and "Oh, of course we're going to take care of a descendant of David."

And third, peasant society anywhere in the world always takes care of a woman about to give birth. I tell people here in western Pennsylvania, where I live, think Amish. Imagine an Amish man showing up with a pregnant wife at the door of an Amish farmer saying, "Can you help us, because my wife's about to give birth." And the Amish farmer says, "There's the barn. Take care of yourself. We haven't got a spare guest room. Get outta here." There's no way. It's just not going to happen.

And then fourth is Mary has in-laws—Elizabeth. Elizabeth has been visited by Mary and she lives in "the hill country of Judea." And Mary has just visited her, and she was welcomed, and Elizabeth knows what's going on, and she will be welcomed again. So if Joseph can't find a place in Bethlehem, one half hour to an hour's ride on a donkey will take him to any village in the hill country of Judea, and if not finding shelter he doesn't go to his in-laws, his name is going to be mud with his in-laws for the rest of his life.

And then he's got time. We think Jesus was born fifteen minutes after they hit town. No. The story says, Greek text translated properly in the King James Version, says, "While they were there, her days—plural—where fulfilled." Therefore, that means that the last stages of her pregnancy took place after they hit town. Now is Joseph so stupid that with two weeks he can't

arrange anything? This is outrageous.

And then finally, tacked onto it all, which is number six, is the shepherd's show up. They stick their nose in the door, and they worship the holy family, and they offer their homage to them, and then it says, "They went home praising God for all that they had seen and heard." The word "all" includes the quality of the hospitality. Now if they had found the mean old innkeeper, dirty stables, young woman just given birth, her aunts aren't there, the midwife isn't there, the mother isn't there, her cousins aren't there, nobody's caring for them, she doesn't know what to do, young Joseph is totally frustrated because he can't take care of his wife, and the place is filthy, and it smells of manure, and the shepherds are going to say, "This is outrageous! You come home with us. May that mean old innkeeper fry in Hell. You come home with us. Our women will take care of you." Why didn't they move them in the first five seconds?

These are the problems. Anybody who wants to take this story in the text of Luke seriously, you've got to have answers to those five problems.

WILKEN: So this whole notion that, and this is usually how it is rehearsed in our minds when we hear the text read—that Mary and Joseph arrived late at night, knocking doors, no one will take them in, even the local hotel is full, they have to kind of make do on their own, and they are left to fend for themselves, and on top of that then give birth to this child, and only the shepherds welcome them—this is just completely unsupportable by the text.

BAILEY: It's unsupportable by the text. The shepherds, if they welcome them, will move them if they are abandoned. They will move them. That's my sixth point. Now a question is: are there any solutions to these. And, yes, the two questions we have to ask are—they're quite simple questions, very straightforward: What was the inn? And where was the manger? Should we take those one at a time?

WILKEN: Let's do that. Great!

BAILEY: All right. What was the inn? That's number one. The word in the Greek text is *kataluma*. *Kata* means "down," and *luo* means "to set free or to unbind or to turn loose." And it's a word that was used for somebody who's on a horse and he's got his stuff on a horse or a donkey or a camel, and the place he spends the night he has to undo the straps, take his stuff down off of his riding animal, put it on the ground and he spends the night. So it's a general word in Greek that means "a place to stay." Nothing specific about it. It can mean any place, anything. So that word, is it used elsewhere in the New Testament? And the answer is, "Yes." Once, and that's in the story of the upper room, where Jesus tells His disciples, "Go into the city, Jerusalem, follow a man carrying a pitcher of water, and when he enters the house ask the house-owner, 'Where is the *kataluma*?'" Here we've got that same word. "And he will show you a large upper room furnished." Aha! When Luke uses the word *kataluma*, he means a guest room attached to a private home. Mark, in his account of the upper room, has the same word. This is the only time other than the birth of Jesus where this word is used in the New Testament. Now, does Luke have another word for an inn? And the answer is, "Yes." When Luke wants to talk about a commercial inn where you go and you get a room and you spend some money and you spend a night, this shows up in the story of the Good Samaritan. And the Good Samaritan takes the wounded man to the inn, and the word there is *pandoxeion*—*pan*, "all"; *doxeo*, "to receive"—the place that receives everybody. And that word *pandoxeion* was so well known across ... when Greek was the common language of the whole Mediterranean basin, which happened for hundreds of years. And that word *pandoxeion* went into Turkish, it went into Armenian, it went into Arabic and it went into Syriac. They just took it over. In Arabic it comes out *fundok*. *Pandoxeion*, *fundok*—it doesn't sound like the same word, but it is. It's evolved out of the same word. So Luke, when he wants to talk about a commercial inn, he's got a word, and when he wants to talk about a guest room attached to a private home, he has a word, and the word he uses for the guest room is the word that shows up in the text. Fine.

WILKEN: Okay, let's take a break right here, Dr. Bailey, and when we come back, I'm going to let Dr. Bailey continue his thought. We're answering the question here on this Christmas Eve

afternoon, “What was the inn?” wherein there was no room for Mary and Joseph, giving some insight into how the first Christmas really went, the birth of our Savior, and then we’ll get to that question, “Where was the manger?” Was it in this cold stall, surrounded by animals, uncaring people? Dr. Kenneth Bailey is our guest, author and lecturer in Middle Eastern New Testament Studies. He spent forty years teaching and living New Testament in Egypt, Cyprus, Lebanon and Jerusalem, and he’s author of numerous books, including *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. And you can find out more about *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* under the “On-Demand” page of our website: issuesetc.org. I’m Todd Wilken. Stay tuned.

[BREAK]

WILKEN: Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* this Christmas Eve afternoon. Dr. Kenneth Bailey is our guest. We’re talking about the first Christmas. Dr. Bailey, before the break you were making the point that Luke, when he writes his gospel, has two different words, one for a commercial inn and the other for a guest room that is appended to an ordinary house. So how does this, understanding this, help us correct the picture of “there was no room in the inn” and answer the next question that you posed, which was “Where was the manger itself?”

BAILEY: Okay. The simplest village home, the simplest peasant home, in the holy land from the time of David up until the second World War—3000 years—was basically three rooms. One room was the central room of the house, and that’s where the people slept and they ate and they cooked and they welcomed their guests and the whole bit. The whole of family life takes place there. And there was at one end of it a lower area, about four feet lower down, that was quite small, big enough for a cow and a donkey and a few sheep. Now every family has to have a cow because that’s your protein, and every family has to have a donkey because that’s your transportation system, and every family’s got to have at least three sheep because that’s your winter clothing. Well, you bring these animals—there’s a door on that lower level—you bring these animals into the house on the lower level every night at sundown or shortly thereafter, they spend the night in that larger family room, and then the first thing in the morning you open that lower door and they all go out and you tie them up outside. So that’s the room for the family. Then the second room, either on the roof, kind of like the prophet’s chamber from the story of Elijah, or on the end, sometimes separated but usually attached, is a guest room. And that’s the word that shows up in the birth story of Jesus. And it doesn’t say “no room” for Jesus. It says “no space.” Like we think of “no room in the inn” meaning, you know, all the rooms are already taken, and we think in terms of a motel. No, this means that there’s already other people in the guest room. So because the guest room is full of previous guests, the family where the holy family found shelter said, “Take the family room.” And that’s what happened.

WILKEN: So where does that locate the manger, Dr. Bailey?

BAILEY: All right. So now the second question becomes, “What about this bit about the manger?” We cannot imagine, given our culture, that there is a manger anyplace except in a barn. But you see, if you’ve got a one room house, and you’ve got a raised terrace on which everybody eats and sleeps and cooks and lives, and then there’s this lower space maybe fourteen feet long and about six feet wide, and it’s four and a half, roughly, feet lower than the raised terrace, with a little staircase joining the two. If you have these animals that you bring in at night, of course you’re going to want some place to put some feed for them in the night. The point being that if Betsy the cow wakes up in the middle of the night and is hungry, you don’t want her making a lot of noise and disturbing everybody. So you have a manger cut out of the floor of the raised terrace at the edge just next to where these animals are.

We know that to be the case because, for example, in the Babylonian Talmud, the great Jewish work of how to keep the law that was developed in the Jewish community starting with about 150 B.C. up to 500 A.D., it talks about how to keep the Sabbath, the Saturday, and it says somebody asks, “Can I take straw, sorry, hay, from under the bed and put it into the manger?” Well, I mean doesn’t everybody have some hay under the bed? Well, not unless you’ve got a cow in the room. Well, in this case they do have a cow in the room. And the answer is, “No.” If

you do that, you've got to get that manger full of whatever hay that the cow is going to eat through the sunlight of the Saturday before Friday night when the sun goes down, or you've broken the law.

Or let's say you get the Old Testament and you've got two stories that are important. And one of them is Saul, and he's staying with the witch of Endor, and he's depressed because he's not eating and it says that this woman goes and takes a calf from within the house and kills it and offers him a meal, he feels better, he starts to cheer up. Well, now doesn't everybody have a calf in the house? Well, in their culture they did.

And an even more critical story is the story of Jephthah. Jephthah goes off to the wars and he's going to have a big fight with the Amalekites, and he says, "O Lord, if you'll just give me victory in battle, when I go home I'll walk home at night and first thing in the morning I'll watch to see what comes out of the house first when I can see my home, and I will offer the first thing that comes out of that door as a sacrifice in gratitude for victory. He of course knows that the family cow, the family donkey, and three or four sheep are tied up in that lower area. Some member of the house will open that lower door. The animals have been cooped up all night. They're going to rush out, and whichever one goes out first he will offer as sacrifice. That makes sense. Ah! But that particular morning his daughter walks out first. Now he's got a tragedy. If you don't know that there are animals in the house, then you have nothing but a stupid, violent, brutal man. What was he hoping for, his mother-in-law? I mean who does he think is going to step out? If there are nothing but people in the house, this is a butcher and a murderer. But if you know that there are animals in the house, then the thing makes sense. He made a mistake, because he shouldn't have left his pledge to God open in that fashion, but he did. Now we know why the story is a tragedy.

Then you get to the New Testament and you find that Jesus tells His disciples, "Take a lamp. People don't take a lamp and put it under a bushel. But they put it on a lamp stand and it will show light to *all* who are in the house. Fine. How many rooms are there in the house when one lamp will shed light on everybody in the house? Obviously, it's one room. They've got a guest room, but that's not where the people live.

And then the story of Jesus when He heals a woman on the Sabbath, and the head of the synagogue makes a big fuss, and he says, "You're working on the Sabbath and you shouldn't do that." And he in public, in the synagogue, says, "You untied your donkey this morning and you led him out and you tied him up outside." Now if there is a stable, the head of the synagogue is going to say, "No, I never touch the animals on the Sabbath." But he can't leave his donkey and his cow in the house all day, because that's culturally unacceptable. And of course you clean up any droppings from the night, and the house is now ready for the day. So he did that that morning. Jesus knows he did it. And if he dares say, "I never touch the animals on the Sabbath," the entire congregation is going to break out in a big guffaw, because they know that that's not possible.

Again, the presupposition of a one-room living space with a lower area for the animals that are brought in at night and taken out in the morning. They want them in the house, the villagers do, for two reasons. One is they provide heat in the wintertime, and second, if they're in the house, nobody's going to steal them. And those are perfect.... I have seen homes like this both in Galilee and in Judea that go way, way back and this is the way people have lived for centuries. We're not sure that the area in the first century was lower down. It could have been on the same level with a very, sort of, heavy wooden barricade between the living space for the people and the space into which the animals are brought at night.

So when you put that bit of information into your perceptions, the whole thing becomes clear. The text says, "While they were there, her days were fulfilled for her to be delivered. She gave birth to her firstborn Son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger." And the reader says, "Manger? That's the living room. Why didn't they open up the guest room?" So Luke, or his source, adds, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, "because there was no space

for them in the guest room.” And the reader says, “Oh, oh, okay, okay, that’s fine. The living room is nicer anyway. The men, of course, will absent themselves. The village midwife will come. The village women are there. The animals will be tied up outside. It’s warm, and it’s clean, and it’s friendly, and everything is okay. And when the shepherds show up they look around and they say, “This is a peasant home like ours, and that’s great, and the village is now bringing honor to us as a village. Nobody is, you know, being mean to these guests in our village, and we couldn’t do any better.” And they go home praising God for the quality of the hospitality.

WILKEN: Dr. Kenneth Bailey is our guest. We’ll continue our conversation with him right on the other side of this break, on this Christmas Eve afternoon. We’re talking about the first Christmas, putting some correction to what has become kind of a romanticized and perhaps not seeing it through the eyes of those who first read these accounts of Jesus’ birth, but seeing it through our own modern and post-modern preconceptions. We’re putting some correction to that. He’s author and lecturer of Middle Eastern New Testament Studies. He spent forty years living and teaching New Testament in Egypt, Cyprus, Lebanon and Jerusalem. He’s author of numerous books, including *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. When we come back from this break, we’ll conclude our conversation on the manger and its location, and then we’ll turn our attention to Joseph. It says, “Joseph was a just man”—“a righteous man” in some translations—and he was unwilling to have Mary put to shame, and so he determined in spite of her pregnancy to take her as a wife. What does it mean that Joseph is a just man? Who was Joseph, this stepfather of our Savior Jesus Christ? I’m Todd Wilken. Stay tuned.

[BREAK]

WILKEN: Welcome back. I’m Todd Wilken. You’re listening to *Issues, Etc.* Christmas Eve afternoon. We’re talking with Kenneth Bailey about the first Christmas.

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Dr. Bailey, more thoughts on the manger here. You said that the shepherds, when they arrive and when they leave, find everything decent and in good order, and they give thanks to God for what they have seen and heard there in the house where Mary and Joseph and the Baby are.

BAILEY: Yeah. Now what is important for us to sort of as we would wind up our reflection on this text is that all of the six problems that I mentioned, when we read it this way, are solved. Joseph comes to town. He is an able guy. He’s got distant relatives. Every village home would be honored to take in the royals. So that’s not a problem. And the village people, you know, are happy to help a woman about to give birth. That’s not a problem. His in-laws are not going to be upset because he’s gone probably to his relatives. If not, he is going to those who know the family of David and are honored to serve somebody who is a descendant of the big man. He’s got plenty of time to do this. And when the shepherds show up, everything is okay.

Well, now what does that mean in terms of our, you know, we’ve got our scenes, our manger scenes and all of that. Everything is okay. Don’t change any of the items that you’ve got in your manger scene at all. Just remember that this is in a private home and not in a stable, and that there isn’t any mean old innkeeper. He’s got to go. And there’s no “no room in the inn,” because the word “inn” doesn’t show up in the text at all. And I like to call it that... Take, if you’re a pastor out there, take your Christmas sermon and turn it on its head. It’s not that Bethlehem was hard-

hearted and you've got to be warm-hearted. The message is: Bethlehem offered their finest, and that's what we have to do. And the shepherds, it's critical for them, because they were outcasts in their society. They were considered unclean, and the rabbis had lists of trades that if you engage in these trades you can't keep the law in a precise fashion. And so you should never teach your son one of these trades. And very strangely shepherds is on the list, probably because sheep gnaw out of all kinds of peoples' wheat fields and so then the shepherd is, you know, he's, as it were, stolen wheat from all kinds of people, and so that's not a good trade.

So when the angels tell the shepherds, "Go and offer your worship to the Child that's born," they're going to say, "Well, they'll never let us in the door." And the angel says, "This will be a sign *for you*: you will find the Babe wrapped," and the shepherds say to themselves, "Oh, that's what we do to our kids when they're born. Oh, so this is a simple peasant family. These are not rich folks in a palace." "And he's lying in a manger." "Oh, manger! So, he's in the living room of somebody's home. Oh, we've got mangers in our living rooms in our homes. We're going to a simple peasant home, not to a palace. Maybe they'll let us in the door."

So the story then is for the shepherds and for the city of Bethlehem: they offered their best. How can we possibly do less? Keep your manger scene exactly the way it is. Just remember that the roof over it is the roof of a house and not the roof of a stable. That's all.

WILKEN: Dr. Bailey, there's a peculiar passage, and it comes in Matthew's gospel, where it talks about the birth of Jesus taking place in this way. I read, "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly."

BAILEY: Yes.

WILKEN: He doesn't end up doing this, of course. But what does it mean when we say, when we hear there that Joseph was a "just man"?

BAILEY: All right, now first of all, we've got to notice that in verse twenty of the text that you read, we translate it, "But as he considered this." Fine. As a Greek word, that word does mean, "considered, reflected on." He sort of becomes a philosopher sitting there trying to figure out what he's going to do next. But if you read it as a real story about real people, that word in Greek, the root of it, has to do with getting upset. And that's the way into Christian Arabic it has been translated over a thousand years ago. He was very upset over his matter. Now why is he upset? Well, somebody comes along and says, "Hey, Joe, did you hear that your fiancé got pregnant?" And then his reply is, "Well, I think I will consider this matter." No! Of course not! The guy's upset. Of course he's upset. He's a human being.

Now the law says that if a woman violates the sexual code outside of marriage, then she is supposed to be stoned. So if Joseph is going to understand justice to mean a precise observance of the law, and that's the only understanding he's got, he's going to drag her out and tell the elders, "I'm just. I'm just. We're engaged, but I have not slept with this woman, and she's pregnant, and you do what you have to do." And they'll stone her. Now it says because he is a "just man," that is, because he is a "righteous man," he decides to put her away quietly.

Now where did he get his definition of justice? Justice does sometimes rightly mean equal application of law. If I drive down the highway too fast, I should get a ticket, and if the son of his honor the mayor drives down the same highway also too fast, he should get a ticket and it should be the same ticket. That's equal application of law. That's good.

But in the Servant Songs of Isaiah—these are four very special songs in the book of Isaiah that talk about what the Messiah, the Suffering Servant of God is going to be like when He appears—the very first one, which is Isaiah 42, talks about "My servant whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My spirit upon Him. He will bring forth justice to the nations," and it goes on to say, "A bruised reed He will not break, a dimly burning wick He will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice." Okay, for this Suffering Servant justice includes the bruised and the exhausted, you don't beat up on. You help them. A bruised reed

you do not break, and a dimly burning wick you do not quench.

Fine. That's a part of Joseph's makeup. He looks at Mary and says, "I don't know what's going on, but she is a dimly burning wick. She's got some kind of a crisis coming ahead of her with the village. I'm not going to put her into trouble. I'm going to quietly divorce her." If he didn't have that theology in his gut, he would have exposed her and the law would have taken its course, and she would have been killed, and Jesus would never have been born. Joseph is not only a theologian, he is a theologian deeply steeped in the texts of the Old Testament that refer to the coming of the Suffering Servant. And this is a huge part of the way this story evolves.

Of course, the angel then comes to him and says, "This is of God. Relax. It's okay." But he had already made that decision that he was not going to break the bruised reed and he was not going to blow out the dimly burning wick. He is a great man. Not a shadowy figure that we know nothing about.

WILKEN: With about a minute and a half here before our next break, Dr. Bailey, let's talk a bit about the so-called "wise men." Is there any indication from whence they came? About a minute and a half before our break.

BAILEY: Yeah. You can understand them as coming from Persia, and that's a traditional way of seeing it. But another way is to take the earliest commentary on the story of Jesus, which comes out of the second century in Justin Martyr, who was a Palestinian himself, and he says they came from Arabia. And we can talk about that after the break if you want to.

WILKEN: Dr. Kenneth Bailey is our guest. We're talking about the first Christmas on this Christmas Eve afternoon. He's author and lecturer in Middle Eastern New Testament Studies. He's author of numerous books, including *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, a tremendous book. He spent forty years living and teaching New Testament in Egypt, Cyprus, Lebanon and Jerusalem. When we come back, we'll talk a bit about, they're called the "magi," they're called the "wise men," sometimes "three kings." It seems as though the story is a bit unsure. Who are these men who come, and when do they come, and to what do they come? What do they come expecting to see? They say, "We come to see the King of the Jews. We saw His star." What did they see? And when they arrive, do you think that they are perplexed to find the king not in Herod's house, not in the king's house, one of Herod's children or grandchildren, but in fact in a house. And then they bow down and they give Him their gifts. And being informed by the Holy Spirit that Herod's up to no good they leave. What's the real story of the so-called "wise men"? Where did they come from and what are they doing when they arrive? We'll talk about all of that on the other side of this break as we talk about the first Christmas on this Christmas Eve afternoon. It's good to celebrate the Savior's birth, to understand it accurately, to understand what the text is really telling us about how it is our Savior entered this world for our salvation. I'm Todd Wilken. Stay tuned. We'll be right back with ten more minutes. Dr. Kenneth Bailey is our guest.

[BREAK]

WILKEN: We're talking about the first Christmas. Kenneth Bailey is our guest. I'm Todd Wilken. You're listening to *Issues, Etc.* Before the break you gave us a brief answer to the possible origin of these wise men. It seems like all of these questions are related. Where did they come from? And then who were they? Why do they take such notice of something that would appear to be distant from them? Why did they travel, and who were they looking for when they arrived? Dr. Bailey, pick up where you left off.

BAILEY: Okay. We sort of finished off with Joseph. He's a man who was able, he was a theologian, he could figure out the right thing to do with Mary. He also was able to manage when Jesus was born. Now we're going to talk about these wise men. Now as a background to that, we need to ask ourselves why did Matthew and Luke pick the stories that they told? Many other things they could have said; lots of data they left out. Why did they include these stories? And if you look at the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah, you'll find Isaiah dreaming dreams about the city of Jerusalem. And he says, "Arise, shine, for your," that is, Jerusalem, "light has come. The

glory of the Lord has risen upon you,” upon Jerusalem. “And the glory will be seen upon you, and kings will come to the brightness of your rising,” namely, of Jerusalem. And then it says a couple of verses later camels are going to show up, and they’re going to come from Sheba and Midian, and they’re going to bring gold and frankincense. And then it says, “The flocks of Kedar are going to gather unto you.” Fine. Jerusalem’s going to have the glory of the Lord shining over it, and great light is going to be there, and very important people are going to come from places like Sheba, which is southern Arabia, and they’re going to come on camels, and they’re going to bring gold and frankincense, and the flocks of Kedar, and that’s Bedouin tribes, are also going to show up. The overtones of the stories of the birth of Jesus are loud and clear. And by selecting the stories which the authors selected under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit they are saying something, and that is, “We really don’t expect these things to happen to the city of Jerusalem, but we find these great promises of God through the prophet Isaiah fulfilled in the birth of the Child six miles away in Bethlehem.” And that’s why those stories are there.

All right. Now the question of who are these three kings, or three wise men? First of all, who said there were three? Well, our tradition says there were three. The text must say there are three. No. The text doesn’t say there are three. It says there were three different kinds of gifts. Maybe five brought gold and three brought frankincense and four brought myrrh. Now you’ve got, what, fourteen? We don’t know how many of them there were. We simply know there were three different kinds of gifts. But notice the extent to which our minds are brainwashed into thinking that there are three. All right. Never mind. The text doesn’t tell us that.

So where did they come from? If you’re going to talk about somebody’s come from the East, it depends on where you are. If you’re sitting in Rome or in Athens, you’re a Greek Christian or you’re a Latin Christian in the early centuries, “the East” meant the Persians. But if you’re in the Holy Land and you talk—and I lived there for ten years in Jerusalem, in Israel—whenever church Sunday morning and there’s a guest that’s come in from Jordan, they would always introduce the guest “[Arabic phrase],” he has come from the East. Now what they meant was, he’s come from the east bank of the Jordan River. We in Jerusalem are on the west bank of the Jordan River, so anybody who comes from the other side of the Jordan River is coming in from the East. If you’re in Rome, the East means Persia. If you are in the Holy Land, the East means what is now Jordan. And that means that these are people who have come in from the great desert of...behind the cultivated edge of Jordan that is closer to the Jordan Valley.

As we mentioned just a few minutes ago, the earliest commentary that we have on the birth story is from Justin Martyr, and he says that the wise men came in from Arabia. The Old Testament talks about Arabia having gold, and frankincense and myrrh are products of trees that only grow in southern Arabia. These are the kinds of wealth that a Bedouin chief, wise man, scholar, ruler, elder would have. He would gold, he would have frankincense, and he would have myrrh. So they brought what they had. This reinforces the fact they’re not coming from distant Persia. They’re coming from quite a long ways a way. The deserts back behind Jordan are huge. And they are the Gentiles, and they come in fulfillment of the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah.

WILKEN: When they come, what can we surmise about their state of mind? Are they looking for a descendent of Herod, or are they closer to understanding what Isaiah is really talking about and therefore not terribly surprised to find the Baby in David’s city, in an ordinary house?

BAILEY: Well, we know that the Bedouins of the desert, the tribes-people of the desert of that period, the stars were very much a part of their pagan mythology. And the following of the planets thereby was very important for them as a part of their religion. And a lot of astronomers have very carefully put together the data that at the time Jesus was born three planets came together, a very, very rare occurrence. And so these scholars and leaders of the desert tribes-people would have noticed this and they would have seen it in what was for them the West. They’re from the East, but they’re looking west. And they obviously decided this is pretty important. We’d better go west and see what we can find. And when they got there, of course,

they looked up the court, and they looked up the king. And then Herod simply flips out because he'd already murdered his favorite wife, he'd murdered a couple of his sons—anybody who shakes his cage in terms of leadership in the community—ah, he'd murdered his brother-in-law, and so he was a big, big time trouble. And then we know how he got mad and he murdered the innocents of Bethlehem. They move on following the star with the advice that they get from the scholars that advised Herod. And I'm sure they were surprised when they found Him in a manger in a one-room home. I'm sure that they were surprised.

WILKEN: Finally, then, Dr. Bailey, with only a minute here before we wrap up our conversation. We have hung on the Christmas story like so many ornaments on a Christmas tree a lot of our own preconceived notions and a lot of our kind of modern and post-modern sensibilities and ideas about how things are and what they should be. What is the benefit of reading these texts for what they say in their own cultural and historical context? One minute.

BAILEY: They come alive in a fresh and, to me, exciting way. Jesus came for the rich, He came for the poor; He came for the insiders, He came for the despised; He came for the Jews, and He came for the Gentiles; He came for those, all classes of society and for all people. And the great wonders promised to the city of Jerusalem are now fulfilled in the Child who is born in a one-room, warm, friendly, welcoming home, and placed in a clean manger with plenty of help and all that is needed to Him. The common people heard Him gladly. And we are the common people. And we too are called upon by the authentic understanding of the story to hear Him gladly in our day and offer our worship to Him, be we poor or rich, powerful or weak, and regardless of our ethnic background.

WILKEN: Dr. Kenneth Bailey is author and lecturer in Middle Eastern New Testament Studies. Forty years he spent living and teaching New Testament in Egypt, Cyprus, Lebanon and Jerusalem. He's author of numerous books, including *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. Dr. Bailey, it's always a pleasure. Thank you for being our guest.

BAILEY: You're welcome. I am honored to participate with you in this ministry.

WILKEN: Folks, as we approach the end of 2008 please consider making a gift to help support this worldwide outreach of *Issues, Etc.* You can donate by check. Make your check payable to "Lutheran Public Radio" and send it to:

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We always need to make sure that what we're reading when we read the Bible, especially these important accounts of Christ's birth all the way through His life, especially the gospels, that we're reading what the text says and not what we think the text should say, or could say. What do we find when we take all the ornaments of our own preconceptions off of the account of our Savior's birth? We find a down to earth, real, accurate account, a real birth, not a glowing baby, not a rude and crude stall where, already from the beginning things were terrible for Him. No. We find an ordinary birth. He is born just like babies were born in that day. He lived just like people lived in that day, and yet without sin. And to all outside appearances it would have seemed nothing out of the ordinary. It is only the promise and the Word of God that tell us looking in on this ordinary story that what is happening here is the entrance of our Savior who will be crucified and risen for us in to our world to save us. I'm Todd Wilken. Merry Christmas. Talk with you again tomorrow.

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* In this context Dr. Bailey probably meant to say *pandoxeion*.

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