

Margaret Barker. *Temple Theology: An Introduction*.

London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004

Reviewed by Dean W. Collinwood and James W. McConkie

In the past two decades, Margaret Barker has managed a miracle: in a prodigious output of a dozen scholarly books and book chapters, as well as numerous articles and conference addresses, Barker, a Cambridge-educated independent scholar, Methodist lay preacher, and former president of the Society for Old Testament Study, has successfully shaken the very foundations of Old Testament and early Christian scholarship. Is it not obvious that the Christianity of Jesus' day and shortly thereafter was heavily influenced by Greek culture? Is it not clear that Jesus' teachings were a product of the Jewish culture, especially the synagogue culture, of his day? "No," says Barker to these claims; it is neither obvious nor clear that Christianity had its origin in these influences. A careful reading of noncanonical sources such as the Enoch literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls suggests that Jesus was influenced by something much more ancient than Hellenistic or synagogue culture. He seemed to have in mind the theology and ordinances of the first Jewish temple, the temple as it had existed before the accretions of paganism and the "reforms" of King Josiah in the seventh century BCE. Indeed, if Barker's thesis holds up to scholarly scrutiny, everyone will be forced to redefine Jesus as a restorer of a religion that had been lost rather than as an inventor of something new.

Such a reworking of centuries of scholarship will not be easy. Think of the scores of German Protestant scholars whose work constituted the academic foundation of intertestamental scholarship throughout the twentieth century and whose labors are now being called into question. Think of the millions of Christians of all stripes who have been taught to believe in a strict trinitarian monotheism—a belief Barker claims is inconsistent with both ancient Jewish religion and the religion Jesus restored. Despite

these formidable obstacles, the Germans are diligently reading Barker and are finding much of value, as are the Catholics, the Russian Orthodox, and many others. At least sixty reviews of Barker's works have already been published (including the lead review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 2003), and Barker has been asked to speak at conferences and symposia in Europe, Turkey, and the United States, including at a Brigham Young University devotional in 2003¹ and at the Joseph Smith Conference in Washington, D.C., in 2005.²

Latter-day Saint readers will find in Barker's work a confirmation of many of their most vital doctrines. They will say of Barker's main thesis, "Joseph Smith taught that, or something very close to that, 175 years ago." But Barker is not LDS; she is a lay Methodist preacher, and so her work seems all the more intriguing to Latter-day Saints, who will wonder why other scholars have missed what Barker has discovered. Unfortunately, some of Barker's books are not easy reading: *The Great High Priest* at over 400 pages and heavily footnoted, and her magnum opus, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, could discourage the lay reader.³

That is where *Temple Theology: An Introduction* comes in. Short (just 104 pages), plainly written, and light on footnotes, *Temple Theology* serves as an excellent introduction to, and summary of, the Barker corpus. Originally delivered as a series of lectures at the University of London in 2003, the four chapters of *Temple Theology* were published in book form by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 2004.

In succinct sections on the Creation, the everlasting covenant, the Atonement, and the mysterious feminine wisdom figure of the Bible, Barker discusses the faith of the Jews before the Babylonian exile. She describes the pivotal, creative role of the Holy of Holies room in the ancient temple, the central place of the mysterious high priest Melchizedek, and the use of anointing oil in early temple worship. She explains why it was easy for the Christians of Jesus' day to think of Jesus as the god of the Old Testament. Upon finishing *Temple Theology*, readers will likely find themselves scouring bookstores for more of Barker's works.

If there is a flaw in Barker's approach, it is that she too often resorts to the speculative phrase "must have been" in order to connect the dots, as in "this must have been how [Ezekiel] imagined the holy of holies" (87), or "[the brightly clothed] woman in the holy of holies . . . must have prompted the early Church to tell the story of Mary" (82). Barker's defense of her conjectures is actually part of her main thesis, namely, that early redactors of the Bible intentionally removed some of the most important descriptions of the ancient religion, forcing everyone today to tease out the old theology from extrabiblical sources if they want to accurately grasp what was going

on in 950 BCE when the first temple was built. Alas, noncanonical sources are often fragmentary and less well understood, thus giving scholars no choice but to read between the lines. One is reminded here of the “plain and precious things” which the Book of Mormon asserts were removed from the Bible (1 Ne. 13:40).

Many of Barker’s intriguing interpretations will feel familiar, making *Temple Theology: An Introduction* a fascinating and informative read for Mormons in general and a rich gold mine for Latter-day Saint scholars. Take, for example, Barker’s analysis of the gods of the Old Testament. “In the more ancient names for the deities . . . we glimpse the Father (God Most High), the Son (Yahweh, the One who appeared in human form), and the Mother (El Shaddai, whose name means the God with breasts)” (7). “God the Father and God the Son were distinguished before the advent of Christianity and . . . the Second Person, the Son, had been the God of Israel, the Great Angel” (56). Notions such as these about multiple gods, male and female, are not offensive to Mormons, nor is Barker’s description of the resurrection as more than just a “post mortem experience.” Barker reads the ancient documents as saying that resurrection was “a theosis, the transformation of a human being into a divine being” (23).

Descriptions of the process of deification are also familiar to Mormons. The concept was specifically taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith in his King Follet sermon and reiterated in his formal revelations over and over again. In fact, Smith’s vision of the three degrees of glory tied the process of deification directly to resurrection, just as Barker asserts. In reference to those who become “gods, even the sons of God” (D&C 76:58), the revelation says, “These are they who shall have part in the first resurrection” (D&C 76:64), and “These are they whose bodies are celestial” (D&C 76:70).

Most fascinating to Latter-day Saints will be Barker’s argument that “the earliest Christian writings assume a world view and a setting which can only have come from a temple—and not the actual temple of their own time” (2). This idea of Jesus as a restorer of ancient truths from the first temple of the tenth century BCE, the restorer of “the remembered and hoped for Eden—the true—temple,” as well as a restorer of the ancient “priesthood,” is so close to the fundamental assumptions of Mormonism that it comes as a breath of fresh air to those who have, for so long, been asked to accept the claim of the higher critics that Jesus just embellished, rather than restored, the ancient religion (2). Barker declares that restoration is why “Jesus was described and remembered as a great high priest (Heb. 4.14).” He was “the Melchizedek” because “*Melchizedek represented*

the older faith" (4). She supports this proposition, as she often does, by turning to the Melchizedek text among the Dead Sea Scrolls (11Q13): "Jesus as Melchizedek can now be seen as the key to the New Testament, and the implication of this is that Melchizedek's temple was the world of the first Christians" (4-5).

Barker's interpretation of Jesus' communities as temple-centered relies upon her view of the book of Revelation as "the key to understanding early Christianity" because it is "steeped in temple imagery" (1). Every informed Mormon is entirely comfortable with the temple imagery in John's apocalypse where sacred clothing (Rev. 3:3-5; 7:13-14; 16:14-15; 19:7-8; 19:14), washings and anointings (Rev. 3:18), and new names (Rev. 2:17; 3:12) are mentioned. Indeed, Hugh Nibley would applaud Barker's acknowledgement that temple concepts are abundant in uncanonized early Christian literature. Not only would Nibley have been interested in what Barker has to say on this subject, but Barker would find informative what Nibley uncovered in *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*.⁴

Take, for example, Nibley's inclusion of Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on the Ordinances, an early Christian document circa 347 CE. The document meshes nicely with the book of Revelation and also describes early Christians as participating in a ritual where they were washed, anointed, and clothed with special garments. The document also speaks about prayer circles and a ritual that starts with a description of the creation of man and the Garden of Eden, and then moves to a world full of temptation. The Lectures concludes with the admonition, "Keep these traditions inviolate, and see that you do not stumble."⁵ Barker, who relies heavily on noncanonical sources herself, would find little amiss with Nibley's analysis of Cyril's Lectures as yet another proof of early Christians' ancient temple connections.

As one would expect, academe is not wholly sold on Barker. Some find her views suspect because they curiously seem to explain too much; others assert, that, while fascinating, Barker's work leaves too many questions unanswered. Such is academe. But even her detractors admit that Barker is breaking new ground, filling in blank spots in Old Testament scholarship, and shifting the proverbial paradigm. In the context of traditional Biblical scholarship, her work is audacious, yet no one dares dismiss it because Barker's scholarship is too excellent, her case too convincing, and her contribution too valuable. With books like *Temple Theology*, the world's understanding of the origins of Christianity will never be the same.

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1. Margaret Barker, "What Did Josiah Reform? The Earlier Religion of Israel," address given at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, May 6, 2003.

2. Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and the Preexilic Israelite Religion," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2006), 69–82.

3. Margaret Barker's major works include *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge [SPCK], 1987); *The Lost Prophet: The Book of Enoch and Its Influence on Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1988); *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (London: SPCK, 1991); *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (London: SPCK, 1992); *On Earth as It Is in Heaven: Temple Symbolism in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1995); *The Risen Lord: The Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1996); *The Revelation of Jesus Christ, Which God Gave to Him to Show to His Servants What Must Soon Take Place (Revelation 1.1)* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2000); and *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2003). For comment on her work, we recommend Terrance L. Szink, "Jerusalem in Lehi's Day," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004), 149–59; and Kevin Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004), 59–90.

4. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2d ed., *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2005).

5. Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 522.