

Margaret Barker’s “The Lord Is One”— a Response

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Margaret Barker’s essay “The Lord Is One” aims at extending the discussion about the doctrine of theosis or deification of humans back to its earliest scriptural roots. From a certain perspective, then, the title of the essay could very well be changed from “The Lord Is One” to “The Lord Is *Many*,” for by its very definition that is the nature of theosis—many gods. Barker’s paper provides a resource in helping us trace the Old Testament roots and rituals of the doctrine of theosis.

The first thing that immediately strikes one is that Barker begins by quoting John 17, the record of Jesus’s high priestly prayer, which I suspect some readers do not automatically associate with the doctrine of theosis. However, there is ample evidence from the history of interpretation to demonstrate that deification of his disciples is exactly what lies behind Jesus’s prayer: “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee. . . . And the glory which thou gavest me, I have given them” (John 17:21–22). Though Jesus Christ is the only natural heir of the Father—that is, the only heir by nature or physical birth—we, through the grace or empowerment extended to us by Christ, may inherit the glory he (Jesus) possesses.

This idea was very much a part of the theology of the Greek Fathers of the Church, and also the Greek theologians who came after. In fact, the Greek Fathers and their successors regarded the whole Johannine corpus as “an especially rich witness to theosis”¹ (see, for example, John 3:8; 14:21–23; 15:4–8; 17:21–23; 1 Jn. 3:2; and 4:12). Having this in mind, theologian

1. Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1994), 126.

Peter of Damascus (who died in the eighth century) invoked the authority of Christ found in this and other passages to state that we become "gods by adoption through grace" (*Philokalia* 3:79).

The second thing that one immediately notes is that Barker uses John 17 as a springboard to take us back to the temple, its structure, and rituals described in Old Testament scripture (the Hebrew Bible), which Barker argues are the very elements, in their original form, that brought about the great transformation. This is something with which Latter-day Saints readily resonate. It is in the temple that gods are established through rituals and covenants.

Here one cannot help but reflect on another Johannine text that is also a temple text, but a text about theosis as well. This is John's Apocalypse, chapters 2 and 3. This observation is not extraneous to Barker's discussion, since she talks about the connection between Jesus Christ, theosis, and the temple as found in the book of Revelation. Barker indicates that even though Old Testament texts were changed over time, John and others of his era were still aware of the earlier meanings and concepts found in the original language of biblical texts. Note some of the specific language used by John in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation to describe the ultimate rewards given by Jesus Christ to faithful disciples and the connection of these rewards to the temple.

- Revelation 2:7—"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I [Jesus Christ] give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." As Dr. Barker has noted, the image of the tree of life is a temple image.
- Revelation 2:10—"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."
- Revelation 2:17—"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it."
- Revelation 2:26–27—"And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father."
- Revelation 3:5—"He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment [temple clothing]; and I will not blot out his name

out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.”

- Revelation 3:12—“Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.”
- Revelation 3:21—“To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.”

Taken all together, it seems to me that the connection between ancient temple ritual and theosis is unmistakable. From beginning to end, John’s Apocalypse has the temple in mind as the underlying platform from which his vision proceeds. It seems to me that chapters 2 and 3 also provide a helpful context for Barker’s discussion of later passages in the book of Revelation.

An important section of Barker’s essay tackles the meaning of *’elohim* as it relates to the concept of theosis in early Old Testament texts. She notes that the Hebrew word for “God” (*’elohim*) is a plural form that can also mean gods or divine beings. She quotes one of the most famous Old Testament texts underpinning the concept of theosis—Psalm 82:1 and 6. She provides a translation from the Hebrew, which is more literal and in my view much more accurate than the King James Version. Compare the two:

King James Version: “God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods. . . . Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.”

Barker’s translation: “*Elohim* has taken his place in the council of El. In the midst of *Elohim* he gives judgement. . . . You are all *Elohim* and sons of Elyon [the Most High].”

Barker points out that the first *’elohim* in the passage has a singular verb, but this *’elohim* is in the midst of *’elohim*, who must somehow be plural. Furthermore, these plural *’elohim* were sons of the Most High God. Complicating the picture is the language of Genesis 1 where the term *’elohim* as creator is used with both singular and plural verbs. Barker asks some pointed questions: Was *’elohim* a plural of majesty used to indicate a singular reality, or was there a memory of plurality within the Divine, such that a male and a female were necessary to be the image of God? And who was El Elyon? Was he the father of the divine *’elohim*?

One Latter-day Saint response might well invoke a passage from what we consider to be additional scripture that seems to clarify and provide answers to the questions being asked. Yes, the term *'elohim* does refer to a plurality of gods. And yes, the term *'elohim* comprehends gods of both genders. And yes, El Elyon, the Most High God, presided over *'elohim* or gods. I quote from the LDS canon, the book of Abraham chapter 4, verses 26 and 27: "And the Gods took counsel among themselves and said: Let us go down and form man [*adam*] in our image, after our likeness. . . . So the Gods went down to organize man [*bara' adam*, as it would appear in Hebrew] in their own image, . . . male and female to form they them."

Barker notes that Jesus himself quoted Psalm 82:6 to certain Jews who wanted to stone him for making himself out to be God. As an aside, but a relevant one in the context of Barker's paper, Jesus was walking in the Jerusalem Temple precinct when he quoted Psalm 82:6. Some have argued that Psalm 82:6, and hence John 10:33–36, cannot mean that Jesus was saying mortals can be deified. But given the context, it can hardly mean anything else. Of this passage in John, we read from *The Interpreter's Bible*: "If an inspired scripture allowed that title to mere men to whom God entrusted a message, how much more can he, whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, claim to say I am the Son of God (v. 36), without incurring the reproach of blasphemy?"²

Jesus says the term "gods" in Psalm 82:6 refers to those "unto whom the word of God came" (John 10:35)—which includes mortal disciples. I would also argue that the divine heavenly court in Psalm 82:1, which refers to "gods"—plural—is composed of those who have become gods. The early Christian theologian Irenaeus (circa AD 180) offered a similar interpretation and presented a revised translation of Psalm 82:1. He said: "And again, 'God stood in the congregation of the gods; He judges among the gods.' He [the psalmist] refers to the Father and the Son, and to those who have received the adoption."³

Though there is indeed great debate regarding the meaning of *'elohim*, with huge theological ramifications, an argument by Professor William

2. George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, 12 vols. (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), 8:634.

3. David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 200.

Brownlee, one of the early experts on the Dead Sea Scrolls, can, in fact, help us in our quest to define the term *'elohim* by looking at the phrase *Yahweh 'elohim* in the Hebrew Bible, usually translated as “Lord God” in the King James Version. Professor Brownlee maintains that the divine name *Yahweh* is a causative form of the verb “to be, to exist” and means literally “He will cause to be.” Thus, Brownlee renders the phrase *Yahweh 'elohim* literally as “‘He creates gods,’ i.e., ‘He creates the members of the divine assembly.’”⁴

Another scholar has written:

The most influential advocate of the view that *yhwh* [Yahweh] is a causative form of the verb “to be” in origin is undoubtedly W. F. Albright. . . . He writes, “If we . . . regard Yahweh as an imperfect verb, it is most naturally to be derived from [the Aramaic and Hebrew verb], ‘to come into existence, to become, be.’ . . . The causative (*hiph'il*) sense of the verb means, “He Causes to Come into Existence,” and the early jussive means, “Let Him Bring into Existence.” Albright has been closely followed in this interpretation by D. N. Freedman, and by Frank Moore Cross, Jr.⁵

These interpretations are extremely controversial in most theological circles because they suggest that the early Hebrew texts were saying the Lord creates or makes others into gods, which contradicts the fundamental notion of monotheism. However, taken to a logical conclusion, I think that is precisely what Barker is suggesting, what the most ancient versions of biblical texts are inferring.

Barker makes an important point when she says that Adam was known as a son of God (Luke 3:38), and Paul showed that all Christians were sons of God (Rom. 8:14). “All Christians were also anointed—the name means anointed ones—and so they were heirs to the high priestly role: ‘A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’ (1 Pet. 2:9). The issue of plurality within the divine, participation in the divine, and incarnation of the divine underlie all early Christian discourse.” I think many Latter-day Saints would agree with this comment. There is much evidence to show that participation in the divine was a cornerstone of early Christian doctrine. In addition to John’s writings, we should consider texts such as 2 Peter 1:4. To what is Peter referring when he speaks

4. William H. Brownlee, “The Ineffable Name of God,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 226 (April 1977): 39.

5. G. H. Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh: The Divine Name in the Bible* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1975), 58–59.

of becoming “partakers of the divine nature” if it is not the doctrine of theosis? D. Todd Christofferson put it this way: “No one is predestined to receive less than all that the Father has for His children.”⁶

Barker maintains that the Deuteronomistic editors were responsible for significant changes in the Hebrew biblical texts. From my perspective, there is no doubt that plain and precious truths were suppressed, elided, or accidentally left out of the biblical text as we have it today.

One of the changes Barker discusses was the Deuteronomistic editors’ denial of “the ancient belief that the Lord was seen in human form.” She cites evidence from Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and John. I think additional evidence can be marshaled from the book of Psalms, a major theme of which is that worshippers could come into the presence of God in his tabernacle or his temple and see him face-to-face. Elsewhere, Barker has stated that the psalms were the hymns of the temple. Thus, we should expect to find some discussion of one of the tabernacle’s or temple’s central purposes, which was to bring worshippers into God’s presence. Elsewhere Barker has also argued that Exodus 23:14–17, which outlines the three annual pilgrimage festivals in ancient Israel, was later edited to change the original meaning. Instead of the traditional translation, “Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord,” the text was actually meant to be read, “Three times in the year every male of yours will see the face of the Lord.” Some of the psalms that speak of seeking and seeing the face of God in his temple include Psalm 17, Psalm 24 (23 in the Septuagint), Psalm 27, and Psalm 105.

In the last section of her paper, Barker refers to an early Christian collection of hymns in Syriac, which were used in initiation rites and point us to the conclusion that those Christians “were temple mystics, and they continued to use the theosis ritual of the temple.” This is stunning, I think. Indeed, we now know that not a few early Syriac Christian hymns speak of theosis. From the fourth-century Syriac Christian poet Ephrem the Syrian, we find this moving refrain:

The Most High knew that Adam wanted to become a god,
so He sent His Son . . .
in order to grant him his desire.

From Ephrem’s hymn “On Virginity,” we find allusion to Athanasius’s epigram—“God became man, so that man may become God.”

6. D. Todd Christofferson, “Why Marriage, Why Family,” *Ensign* 45 (May 2015): 52.

Divinity flew down and descended
 To raise and draw up humanity.
 The Son has made beautiful the servant's deformity,
 And he has become a god, just as he desired.

Finally, from Ephrem's hymn "On Faith" we hear:

He gave us divinity,
 We gave Him humanity.⁷

Conclusion

What does all this mean to us personally, or what can it mean? How might we liken all of the foregoing to our personal circumstances? In answer, the following remarkable statement was penned by contemporary Greek Orthodox theologian Christoforos Stavropoulos:

In the Holy Scriptures, where God himself speaks, we read of a unique call directed to us. God speaks to us human beings clearly and directly and he says: "I said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High—all of you'" (see Ps. 82:6 and John 10:34). Do we hear that voice? Do we understand the meaning of this calling? Do we accept that we should in fact be on a journey, a road which leads to Theosis? As human beings we each have this one, unique calling, to achieve Theosis. In other words, we are each destined to become a god; to be like God Himself, to be united with Him. The Apostle Peter describes with total clarity the purpose of life: we are to "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). This is the purpose of your life; that you be a participant, a sharer in the nature of God and in the life of Christ, a communicant of divine energy—to become just like God, a true God.⁸

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7. Quoted in Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 129.

8. Archimandrite Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature: An Inspiring Presentation of Man's Purpose in Life According to Orthodox Theology*, trans. Stanley S. Harakas (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing, 1976), 17–18.