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Book Review

Temple Mysticism: An Introduction

Margaret Barker

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BOOK REVIEW

Kevin Christensen

Review of Margaret Barker, Temple Mysticism: An Introduction (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011), 181 pp. \$18.94.

Margaret Barker is a biblical scholar whose books have been attracting increasing Latter-day Saint attention for over a decade. She has also been making inroads in the wider circles of scholarship, as evidenced by her *Temple Theology: An Introduction* being shortlisted for the Michael Ramsey Prize for theological writing, the first woman so honored. And she was awarded a Doctor of Divinity by the Archbishop of Canterbury for *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*. She is a prolific writer and a busy speaker.

The first and, I think, only obstacle for LDS readers in Margaret Barker's *Temple Mysticism* can be removed by seeing what she means by temple mysticism. The term *mysticism* has been employed in a range of meanings by different writers (including me). Misunderstanding what she means by temple mysticism can set a wrong expectation for her book. Let me digress to illustrate. When I went to England in 1973, I had to learn what the English meant by *biscuit*, *chips*, *lift*, *bonnet* and *boot*. Where I came from, the words meant something else. Once I understood what these terms meant, what the signs signified in that context, I got on very well. As a more academic example, because both Eliade and Jung use the word *archetype*

in different ways there is something amiss in reading them as though they each meant the same thing by it.¹

I think I may be a fairly typical LDS reader in getting my first serious introduction to the term *mysticism* from Hugh Nibley's "Prophets and Mystics," which is a chapter in *The World and the Prophets*.² It happens that Barker's approach to temple mysticism is quite distinct. Nibley defines mysticism as "an intuitive and ecstatic union with the deity obtained by means of contemplation and other mental exercises."³ He emphasizes the incommunicable nature of the experiences, the impersonal view of deity, and the need for a teacher/guide to direct the student on the path to illumination. While Nibley's essay defines mysticism in a conventional way, I have discovered other approaches and sources that use the term differently.⁴ Margaret Barker's temple mystics report a very different kind of experience than that sort Nibley describes in his essay. For Barker, temple mysticism centers on "seeing the Lord." Her temple mystics are unquestionably more akin to Lehi, Nephi, Alma, Joseph Smith, and Sidney Ridgon than are Nibley's mystics.

This book is a thematic sequel to her earlier book, *Temple Theology: An Introduction*. She uses the title, *Temple Mysticism*, to emphasize the experiences that precede and underlie the theology, ritual, and liturgy that make Temple Theology. The point is to emphasize what Ninian Smart calls "the Experiential

1. William Hamblin, "Joseph or Jung: A Response to Douglas Salmon," *FARMS Review* 13.2 (2001): 99–100.

2. Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954).

3. Nibley, *World and the Prophets*, 89.

4. My favorite LDS approach essay has become Mark E. Koltko, "Mysticism and Mormonism: An LDS Perspective on Transcendence and Higher Consciousness," *Sunstone* 13/2 (April 1989): 14–19. I have also been influenced by the approaches in Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Cross Cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), especially 71–72, and Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 78–84.

**Dimension” of faith, that is, the wine that makes the wine bottles necessary and important.⁵ Barker uses the term *mysticism* to evoke notions of personal experience and the ritual context that intends to evoke that reality, rather than mere intellectual theologizing or moralizing.

Once adjusted to Barker’s use of the term *temple mysticism*, LDS readers should find themselves very comfortable with her approach. Her defining examples of temple mystics are Isaiah and John. With Isaiah, she cites the vision in Isaiah 6, in which the prophet reports, “I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne.” She then comments that “John identified the enthroned figure of Isaiah’s vision as Jesus in glory, showing that Jesus’ closest disciples understood him in the context of temple mysticism, and indeed identified him as the figure at the very centre of the mystical vision” (p. 2). Barker explains that “Jesus himself received visions in the manner of temple mystics, and that these formed the core of Revelation,” and she says that recognizing this is “important for recovering temple mysticism and for establishing its key role in early Christianity” (p. 24). She explains that

there are glimpses elsewhere of Jesus the temple mystic: he saw the heavens open at his baptism (Mark 1:10), and the heavenly voice named him as the divine Son. Origin knew that at his baptism, Jesus saw the chariot throne that Ezekiel had seen by the River Chebar (Ezekiel 1:14–28). Jesus then spent 40 days in the wilderness “with the wild beasts and the angels served him” (Mark 1:13, my translation). He was alone and so must have reported these experiences to others, and presumably not in Greek. This is important because in Hebrew the “wild beasts” would have been the same as the “living creatures” of the chariot throne, *hayyot* (Ezek. 1:5; Rev. 4:6), and the serving angels would have been the

5. Smart, *Worldviews*, 62.

working hosts in the throne vision since “serve” *‘abad*,’ also means worship in Hebrew (Rev. 5:11). Jesus’ mystical experience in the desert is described more fully in the opening scene of Revelation. (p 25)

For Barker, “seeing the Lord—temple mysticism—was both controversial and suppressed” (p. 25). The ones doing the suppressing were the Deuteronomists, and she has shown how many Bible texts have been changed and/or corrupted to prevent their being read to say that God could be seen.

The Qumran texts have shown beyond reasonable doubt that . . . Hebrew texts of special interest to Christians were changed or disappeared. One of the proof texts at the beginning of Hebrews is in the LXX and in a Qumran fragment, but “Let all God’s angels worship him” (LXX Deut. 32:43; Heb. 1:6) is not in the MT. This key verse shows that Jesus was identified as Yahweh, the first born. Yahweh, the LORD, is not usually identified as the first-born son, but that was the original belief. Yahweh was the son of God Most High—as Gabriel announced to Mary (Luke 1:32)—and so the Hebrew scriptures witness to Father and Son. The Christian proclamation “Jesus is LORD” meant Jesus is Yahweh. The human manifestation of the LORD, the son of God Most High, was at the heart of temple mysticism, but was one of the crucial pieces of evidence that did not become part of the MT. Nor did the verse about God Most High dividing the nations among “the sons of God”, of whom Yahweh received Jacob (Deut. 32:8). The sons of God became in the MT the incomprehensible “sons of Israel”. There are many examples, as we shall see, in the course of reconstructing temple mysticism. (pp. 27–28)

She further defines what she means by *temple mysticism* by saying, “The temple mystics were messengers from heaven to earth; their vision was not just a private ecstasy, but always a call to be the bearer of revelation” (p. 5). Here again her temple mysticism is quite distinct compared to the picture of mystics I got from Nibley, where private ecstasy is a key characteristic. Still, commonalities in their uses of the term *mystic* involve a personal encounter with God and experience involving a profound sense of oneness. And her discussions throughout all of her work resonates with LDS scripture and casts as much light on them by implication as upon the Bible by direct examination:

In the Hebrew scriptures, then, there are two positions: the LORD could be seen—the temple tradition—and the LORD could not be seen. “We have beheld his glory” wrote John (John 1:14), and the climax of the book of Revelation, and thus of the New Testament is that the servants of God-and-the-Lamb stand before the throne and see his face (Rev. 22:4). Christianity was rooted in the older temple tradition and its mysticism. (p. 55)

Several LDS writers have observed how neatly her approach fits with what we have in the Book of Mormon and indeed casts new and significant light there.⁶ Barker’s comments on the Book of Mormon at the Joseph Smith Conference at the Library

6. For example Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Vol. 1 First Nephi* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007); LeGrand L. Baker and Stephen D. Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord?: The Psalms in Israel’s Temple Worship and in the Book of Mormon* 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, Eborn Books), 2011; Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt, “His Secret Is with the Righteous”: *Instructional Wisdom in the Book of Mormon*, Occasional Papers 5 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2007); and Kevin Christensen, *Paradigms Regained: The Scholarship of Margaret Barker and Its Significance for Mormon Studies*, Occasional Papers no. 2 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 94; Frederick M. Huchel, “Antecedents of the Restoration in the Ancient Temple,” *FARMS Review* 21.1 (2009), 10–25; D. John Butler, *Plain and Precious Things: The Temple Religion of the Book of Mormon’s Visionary Men* (Kindle, 2012).

of Congress demonstrate her agreement.⁷ What is more, non-LDS scholars who have become interested in her work are also becoming aware of the agreement with LDS scripture and temple worship. For example, early in 2012, she delivered the Fr Alexander Schmemmann Memorial Lecture at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, New York. After the recording of her talk on "Our Great High Priest, The Church as the New Temple," during a Q&A period she was directly asked about the Mormon interest in her work.⁸ This is in part due to the close collaboration and communication she has had with many LDS scholars since her 2003 visit to BYU, her 2005 talk on "Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition," and ongoing interactions at SBL meetings, and Temple studies groups, first in England and more recently in Utah. It also derives from the obvious convergence of key ideas: Jesus seen as Yahweh incarnate, El Elyon as the Father of Yahweh, Melchizedek priesthood, plain and precious things being lost from the canon, the notion of a Mother in Heaven, and the importance of the council visions, the tree of life, Jerusalem 600 BC, the central importance of the temple, and much more.

This book is a thematic sequel to her earlier *Temple Theology: An Introduction*. Readers of her earlier books, especially those directed more to scholars than to lay readers, may find much that is familiar. For instance, readers of *The Great High Priest* will find familiar the sections on Pythagoras as influenced by First Temple ideas, such as she demonstrates in Ezekiel, and follows through Pythagoras into Plato's *Timaeus*. Readers of

7. See Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," in *Brigham Young University Studies* 44.4, (2005): 69–82. Also Margaret Barker and Kevin Christensen, "Seeking the Face of the Lord: Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition," in Reid L. Neilson and Terryl Givens, eds., *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 143–72.

8. http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/svsvoices/our_great_high_priest_the_church_is_the_new_temple.

her Isaiah and Enoch commentaries may recognize many of the ideas that get more popular treatment here. But there is also much that is new. The middle chapters of her book explore “three fundamental characteristics of temple mysticism: first the unity, and then the light and the glory” (p. 43). I was particularly impressed by the section “Born from Above,” in which she shows how “John took several themes from temple mysticism to show how far the Jews had lost touch with their original temple teachings” (pp. 100–104). She discusses how John’s contemporary Josephus “defined ‘the Jews’ as people who had returned from Babylon, which means the heirs of those who had purged the temple and rejected the older ways” (p. 101). She suggests that John used the term in the same way and illustrates in several passages in his gospel, how they “no longer understood their own heritage” (p. 101). She discusses Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus, who did not understand the concept of being “born again.” Jesus explains in terms of what Barker shows is the First Temple tradition, but had ask, “Are you the teacher in Israel, and yet you do not understand this?” (p. 101).

She then analyzes Psalm 110, showing that it describes “what happened in the Holy of Holies as the human king became the divine Son” (p. 102). She observes that “some early Christians naturally read this verse as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus; by changing one letter they made ‘womb’ into ‘Mary’: ‘I have begotten you as the Morning Star from Mary’” (p. 103). These pages make for an interesting context against which to read Alma 7:10, about Jesus being “born of Mary,” and further, for considering Alma as a teacher in Zarahemla, who in his temple-themed discourses does seem very much in tune with the thought world that Barker explores.

She discusses the high priestly blessing, “found on minute silver scrolls dated to about 600 BCE, the end of the first temple period” (p. 42). The scrolls quote Number 6:25, the priestly blessing “May the LORD make his face to shine upon

you.” William Hamblin has pointed out how these scrolls are early evidence for writing on metal and, specifically, writing from one of the Books of Moses.⁹ It is also interesting in light of Barker’s analysis to reconsider Mosiah 13:5 and 3 Nephi 19:25, 30, for accounts of the shining.

The penultimate chapter offers an insightful discussion of the Servant in Isaiah and the significance of Jesus’ self-identification as the Servant. She ranges across the role of the high priest in the Day of Atonement, variant readings in different versions of the servant songs, including the scrolls and the Targums, and makes comparisons with 1 Enoch. She makes insightful observations and suggestions, noting the implications of textual variants, and suggests in some instances alternate readings of the Hebrew.

A final postscript describes several phases and explanations of what ultimately we recognize as apostasy. First, she cites the purges instigated by the Deuteronomists, and notes their observable effect on the writings they transmitted. Secondly, she notes how the Church needed to distinguish between Christianity and Gnosis, despite “early gnostic thought” having “much in common with temple mysticism” (p. 170). Thirdly, she describes “pressure in the Church for Christians not to practice Jewish customs.” As a consequence, “the temple roots of Christianity were less well understood, and Judaism itself was changed after the destruction of the temple.” Then she looks at the education of most New Testament scholars “as classicists, rather than Hebraists” who then saw key elements in Christianity as “Platonism, rather than the temple tradition.” All of this fits very well with the picture in the Noel Reynolds’s

9. William Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean” *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 40.

edited survey, *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*.¹⁰

LDS scholars of the apostasy have traditionally focused on the loss of plain and precious things that followed on the death of the apostles. Barker's work has encouraged several of us to look back at Lehi's world. The obvious issue, of course, is what about the use of Deuteronomy in the Book of Mormon and the points of agreement between Jeremiah and Deuteronomy? Any text, I think, can be used by many people, and often it is the points of resemblance that form the foundation of rivalry that emerges in differences. Given that significant degree of agreement with and knowledge of Deuteronomy, I find it striking that Jeremiah's points of disagreement with Deuteronomy match with the key points that Barker identifies as defining the reform.

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10. Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy* (Provo, UT: FARMS: 2005).

