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! Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 23 | 2003

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Biblical Scholar Presents Lectures at BYU

During the week of 5–9 May, the Institute sponsored a visit by British biblical scholar Margaret Barker to Brigham Young University. Each morning, Barker offered a seminar (usually three hours in length) to a group of invited faculty and guests in which she summarized her research and numerous publications. She also delivered a university forum address during her stay, as well as an evening public lecture in the auditorium of the Harold B. Lee Library.

Barker uses the apocryphal Enoch literature as a window into a distinct tradition of ancient Hebrew religious belief—one that, she believes, goes back to the Judaism of the First (or Solomonian) Temple but has been obscured by the reforms of King Josiah and the so-called Deuteronomists. She argues that much has been lost or suppressed from the text of the Old Testament as we now have it,

including, for instance, the understanding that Yahweh, or Jehovah, was a distinct divine being, the son of El, the Father God.

In her seminars and public lectures, Barker, who is a Methodist and a trainer of Methodist preachers, treated a number of themes that were, to put it mildly, very congenial to her Latter-day Saint audience. She contended, for example, that a grasp of the ancient temple is essential to a proper understanding of the New Testament, and she noted the temple's connection with such matters as the story of creation, the veil (which, on one level at least, represents the flesh of mortality) separating this world from the realm of divine beings, ascension into the heavenly presence of God, and apotheosis (human divinization). She emphasized the significance of such figures as Enoch and Melchizedek, and the significance of the priesthood of Melchizedek, in the older Jewish tradition. Moreover, she devoted one morning of the seminar to a discussion of “the Lost Lady of Israel,” Asherah, or Wisdom,

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Latest METI Book Probes Soul, Self-Knowledge

A parallel English-Arabic text of the Islamic philosophical work *Iksir al-Arifin*, or *Elixir of the Gnostics*, is the latest publication in the Islamic Translation Series, part of the Institute's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. The author, Sadr al-Din Muhammad Shirazi, better known as Mulla Īadrā (A.D. 1572–1640), is considered one of the greatest Islamic philosophers of the last 600 years and in recent years has become one of the most well known. Adept at finding flaws in the work of previous great thinkers, he was at the same time able to think independently of them, creating his own philosophical approach that he called “transcendent philosophy.” This approach combined

reason, intellectual intuition, illumination, and revelation to arrive at truth.

Series editor D. Morgan Davis says that *Elixir of the Gnostics* is “a very interesting example of how Islam was influenced by Neoplatonism and classical Persian religious notions. It is a cogent summary of ‘the big picture’ as it was envisioned by some Muslim thinkers in the Middle Ages.”

Elixir demonstrates Mulla Īadrā's skill as a scholar and philosopher in that it adapts and expands on Afdal al-Din Kashani's 13th-century Persian work, the *Jawidan-nama* (The Book of the Everlasting). The work deals with the importance of self-knowledge in the soul's journey, which ends where it begins—with God. Self-knowledge is the means by which the

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Jacob's Connections to First Temple Traditions

In a previous report I showed how the Book of Mormon's portrayal of Nephi, son of Lehi, compares favorably to a preexilic Hebrew wisdom tradition reconstructed by biblical scholar Margaret Barker.¹ This report highlights further connections between the Book of Mormon and traditions from ancient Israel that Barker asserts "have been lost but for the accidents of archaeological discovery and the evidence of pre-Christian texts preserved and transmitted only by Christian hands."²

Nephi's vision of the first-century apostasy, wherein "plain and precious things were taken away" from the Bible (1 Nephi 13:29), is consistent with Barker's view that key scriptural texts and traditions were suppressed after the deaths of the apostles. She also asserts that such materials were lost or suppressed from the canon much earlier as well, by Deuteronomist reformers during the exile, though those materials survived in significant circles in Palestine until the first century A.D.³ It is significant that certain themes in the writings of the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob can be seen as reflecting a familiarity with those lost traditions. The connections are not direct, but they suggest the possibility that certain temple-related traditions were known to Lehi and persisted in the writings of his sons, Nephi and later Jacob.

Jacob 4:14 reads:

The Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness . . . and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them.

Interestingly, the verses preceding that statement regarding a lost "plainness" summarize the plain and simple themes of Jacob's ministry (see vv. 4–13) and appear to mirror the very things

that the Deuteronomists deemphasized during reforms begun in King Josiah's day and continued during and after the exile.

Jacob's reference to "the Jews" probably meant not all of the Jewish nation but specifically "the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of [Lehi]," having rejected his visions (1 Nephi 2:13). With the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., many of the Jews at Jerusalem became exiles (see Jeremiah 52:28–30), while the people of the land, who were not deported to Babylon, preserved some of that "plainness" until the time of the early Christians.⁴ Against this background, Jacob's words in Jacob 4:4–13 take on added interest, echoing several points that appear in Barker's reconstruction of what had been lost and at whose initiative.

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The brief points that follow suggest that the writings of Jacob, like those of Nephi, may preserve aspects of Hebrew religious understanding that persisted from Old World preexilic times on into Jacob's time in the New World. The clues in Jacob's writings are

not as strong as those in Nephi's writings, but the fact that they fit well with Barker's reconstruction makes them worth consideration.

Barker asserts that Israel's "wisdom [tradition] was eliminated" during the Deuteronomist reforms, while Jacob states that the Lord "counselth in wisdom" (Jacob 4:10), supporting the idea that the Nephites, who did not experience the exile, were still comfortable seeing God associated with wisdom (if not Wisdom), as was true in ancient Near Eastern literature.⁵ Barker writes that "the vision of God [was] abandoned," and Jacob, consistent with the preexilic concept of the heavenly ascent (in which mortals can enter the heavenly realm physically, as did Enoch, or through a visionary experience, as did Isaiah), reports that his people have "many revelations and the spirit of prophecy" (v. 6) and urges them to "despise not the revelations of God" (v. 8).

Barker describes a reaction against "the hosts of heaven and the angels" in favor of a strict monotheism and explains that, in the tradition of the First

Temple, “there was a High God and several Sons of God, one of whom was Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel.”⁶ In keeping with earlier tradition, Jacob records, “Behold, they [the holy prophets] believed in Christ and worshiped the Father in his name, and also we worship the Father in his name” (v. 5). Barker quotes from biblical, pseudepigraphal, and early Christian writings that emphasize the priestly visionaries’ knowledge of things past and future as depicted on the temple veil and as shown to them in visions.⁷ Jacob, a temple priest, speaks to the same theme: “The Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be; wherefore, these things are manifested unto us plainly, for the salvation of our souls” (Jacob 4:13).

Barker argues that part of the Deuteronomist reform involved the rejection of a view of wisdom that predicts the future.⁸ Jacob 4:4 acknowledges that ancient Israel had just such a prophetic tradition: “We knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming; and not only we ourselves had a hope of his glory, but also all the holy prophets which were before us.” This point is of added interest because Jacob’s mention of the Jews’ lost plainness later in verse 14 may allude to, among other things, the very kind of lost or suppressed prophetic tradition that Barker believes was a distinctive feature of Israel’s First Temple period.

How do we account for this correspondence of themes? Jacob was born to Lehi and Sariah in the wilderness, probably very shortly before the family’s departure to the New World (see 1 Nephi 18:7, 19), and so had no direct contact with the Jews at Jerusalem. But Jacob’s father, Lehi, did have that contact. As a contemporary of King Josiah, Lehi was likely aware of the discovery of the book of the law in 621 B.C. (see 2 Kings 22:8–14) and familiar with the early phases of the Deuteronomist reform. Jacob probably acquired his knowledge of a lost plainness from Lehi and Nephi, both of whose visions and teachings are rich in themes that accord with Barker’s reconstruction of First Temple traditions.

Jacob may have learned much of this from the blessing Lehi gave to him in 2 Nephi 2, which reflects in several ways the wisdom tradition that Barker associates with the temple at Jerusalem—for

example, the emphasis on revelation, an Eden story containing an account of fallen angels, and the idea of the Holy Messiah as redeeming sacrifice, all suggesting the priestly role of the Holy One.⁹

Because Lehi and Nephi likely had direct knowledge of the plain and simple truths that the Jews in Jerusalem rejected, they would have taught them to Jacob. Sometime in the three decades after the journey to the New World, Nephi consecrated Jacob as a priest over “the land of my people” (2 Nephi 5:26). So it is appropriate that Jacob’s writings in Jacob 4, as well as his discourses in 2 Nephi 6–11, are particularly dense in temple themes that recur in Barker’s reconstruction. !

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Notes

1. See “Nephi, Wisdom, and the Deuteronomist Reform,” *Insights* 23/2 (2003): 2–3. Barker is an accomplished Old Testament scholar and a Methodist preacher.
2. Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987), 7; emphasis removed.
3. See my study “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *FARMS Occasional Papers*, no. 2 (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 28–30. See also Margaret Barker, “Text and Context,” in *The Great High Priest* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 294–315.
4. See Barker, *Lost Prophet* (London: SPCK, 1988), 18–19.
5. For a discussion of possible connections between ancient Hebrew wisdom literature and the Book of Mormon, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 209–17.
6. The preceding quotations from Barker come from her book *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 15, 3.
7. See Barker, *The Great High Priest*, 193, citing 3 Enoch 45; Habakkuk 2:2–3; 1 Enoch 87.3; Jubilees 1.26; 2 Baruch 59.4–10; Ignatius, *Philippians*, 9; Clement, *Miscellanies*, 6: 7, 7.17; and Origen, *Celsus* 3.37.
8. Barker, *The Older Testament*, 95–97.
9. See my “Paradigms Regained,” 21–22, 40, 47–49, 51–52, 63–65.

By Kevin Christensen

who was once thought to be the consort of Elohim and was symbolized by a tree.¹

Participants in the seminar were delighted to receive copies of her richly fascinating latest book, fresh from the press, entitled *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2003). ! —reported by Daniel C. Peterson

Note

1. On this same theme, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191–243; see also an abridged version of that same article, “Nephi and His Asherah,” *JBMS* 9/2 (2000): 16–25.

The relevance of Margaret Barker’s scholarship to the Book of Mormon has been surveyed in a FARMS publication by Kevin Christensen titled “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies” (*FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 [2001]). For purchasing information, visit the Bookstore section of the FARMS Web site.

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soul, having been created in the divine image, realizes its full potential. Mulla Īadrā defines the soul’s progress as a gradual disengagement from all embodiment and materiality and a return to its transcendent essence. He maintains that philosophy is the most direct path to achieve this self-knowledge and progression.

William C. Chittick, translator of *Elixir* from Arabic, received his Ph.D. from the University of Tehran and is currently a professor of comparative studies at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He specializes in Islamic intellectual history and has authored or served as editor for more than 20 books on Islamic philosophy and theology.

In May 2003, on the occasion of the publication of *Elixir* at BYU, Professor Chittick visited campus and delivered two lectures. The first provided a basic and very accessible introduction to Sufism, or what some refer to as Islamic mysticism. The following day, Chittick lectured on the philosophy of the Origin and the Return, the central theme of *Elixir* and an important motif in Islamic philosophy generally. It argues that God is the source of the human soul and, as such, is the final destiny to which it will inevitably and finally return.

To purchase a copy of *Elixir* of the Gnostics, visit the Book Orders section of the METI Web site at <http://meti.byu.edu/orders.php>. !

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