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Margaret Barker on *Christmas: The Original Story*
by Kevin Christensen

In her introduction to her fourteenth book, Margaret Barker explains that for many years she has been leading study days for students wanting to explore the Christmas stories. “These looked at the well-known texts in the New Testament, and then at the less well known, such as the Infancy Gospel of James, and the Qur’an.” Rather than simply repeating them for comfortingly familiarity, or uncomfortably trying to dissect them, her book represents an attempt to read them in their cultural context in order to enrich our understanding. She clearly agrees with Nephi that “there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken to the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews.” (See 1 Nephi 25:5) She explains that:

The writings of the time were steeped in prophecies, but they were also sensitive to other patterns of symbolism. Perhaps the most familiar in the New Testament is the temple symbolism in Hebrews, which is not explained to the readers. They must have known what it meant....The temple with its complex system of furnishings and festivals, rites, and rituals was assumed by the early Christians as their world view. The way opened 'through the curtain, that is through his flesh' (Heb. 10:20) is a meaningless statement outside of the world of the temple.”¹

She asks the question, “What are we not seeing in the Christmas stories?”² For instance, she notes that for many years, scholars have approached Luke based on the assumption that he was writing for the Gentiles, outsiders who would have been oblivious to any allusions to priestly or temple lore in his work. But she notes that recent scholarship has taken an obvious starting point to questioning this. “Who was 'the most excellent Theophilus' for whom Luke was writing? Was he in fact Theophilus the high priest who held office from 37 to 41 CE and was closely involved with the turmoil of the Church's early years in Jerusalem?”³ Her case is that reading the nativity stories in light of the temple tradition help us better understand them. Think about the obvious temple accounts the nativity stories, for instance, with Zecharias, serving in the temple in Luke 1:5-9, or Jesus being presented at the temple in Luke 2:22-39, then skipping twelve years in order to tell another temple story. Barker wants us to learn to see the significance of these and other less immediately obvious temple themes. Consider, for instance in the significance of details that Luke provides:

She wrapped him in swaddling clothes is, literally, 'she wrapped him around.' Why mention the baby's clothes? Because the clothing of the 'newly born' high priest was an important part of his becoming the Son. Enoch was taken from his earthly garments—his human body—and clothed

1 Margaret Barker, *Christmas: The Original Story* (London, SPCK, 2008) 20-21.

2 Ibid.

3 Barker, *Christmas*, 52.

with the garments of God's glory because he had become part of the Glory. The new child is clothed with earthly garments, so the process is reversed.⁴

Barker includes both a discussion and translation of the very early Infancy Gospel of James. Some LDS readers may remember Hugh Nibley's favorable discussion of this text in an essay included in his *Mormonism and Early Christianity*. Barker shows how temple imagery permeates the story. I particularly love where the James account reports that Mary had been among those selected to weave a new veil for the temple. And that Gabriel's annunciation comes to her while she is actually weaving the veil. Only the temple background explains the significance of these details. The veil symbolizes the matter that hides the Holy of Holies in the temple, symbolizing our own physical birth does to all of us, separating us from God and eternity. The four different threads that make up the veil represent the four elements. And the robe of the high priest is made up the same materials. But when the high priest enters the Holy of Holies, he removes the colored robe that represents matter, and dons a white robe, which symbolizes the angelic state.

The incident of the weaving the temple veil shows how a simple story was recognized as a sign and became the vehicle for a sophisticated theology. To those whose eyes had not been opened, Mary was weaving a piece of fabric, but to those who were relating the the heavenly and early stories—on earth as it is in heaven—the incident symbolized the process of incarnation.⁵

Just as she casts light on familiar stories in Luke, so she does with Matthew. For instance, “Matthew presents the mysterious conception as fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: 'Behold the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son' (Isa. 7.14). The key word is `almah,' a word with various meanings. Traditionally Christians have translated it Virgin, but more recently 'young woman' has become popular. The translators of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek chose the unambiguous word 'virgin' parthenos for `almah' and they must have had a reason for doing this. In other words, the Jewish community in Egypt had a memory that `almah in this prophecy meant Virgin.”⁶

The issues here are deeper than the words used to translate, but the background behind the words used. In an earlier chapter, she observes that “Despite the way the Old Testament has usually been read, there was a Lady in the ancient tradition. She appears with names such as the Virgin or the Daughter of Zion. The Lady is found in Isaiah, especially in the second part of the book, where she and the mysterious male figure, the Servant, are the main characters in the prophecies...Micah, who prophesied in the eighth century BCE at the same time as Isaiah also knew the Lady... After her labor she would give birth to the great Shepherd of Israel (Micah 5:2-4. This is the obvious context for Isaiah's oracle about Immanuel: 'Behold the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and call his name Immanuel' (Isa. 7.14) The Hebrew has 'the', the Greek has 'the', Matthew quotes 'the Virgin' (Matt. 1.23), but the English version, for some reason, make her an indeterminate figure 'a virgin shall conceive.’⁷

To LDS readers, this should be very interesting, particularly as she discusses how “The Lady and her tree symbol were an issue for the Jerusalem authorities in the time of Jesus.”⁸ BYU scholar Daniel Peterson wrote a path-breaking essay showing how the ancient traditions of the Lady and her tree are

4 Barker, 75-6.

5 Barker, 143.

6 Barker, 100-101

7 Barker, 42-43

8 Barker, 85.

presupposed in 1 Nephi 13.⁹ More recently John Tvedtnes has posted a fascinating new article with additional sources to consider. All of this background is important in understanding just how and why Mary became such an important figure in Christianity, and why particular symbols, titles, and ideas came to be associated with her. And as we do so, we should consider in turn, how those symbols, titles, and ideas cast light on the Book of Mormon Christmas stories, and the mentions of Mary and of the tree and Wisdom, and other titles that came to be associated with her. As LDS we have tended to inherit a Protestant squeamishness about the Catholic veneration of Mary. Yet as we come to understand the ancient context for the symbolic complex that gathered around her, we can also come to understand why this happened. And at the same time, we can see why the Book of Mormon prophets mention Mary specifically, and see more significance in the context provided in the passages that mention her role.

Barker explains that “*The Christmas story does not describe the birth of the Son of God; it describes the incarnation of the Son of God who was 'born' in eternity.*”¹⁰ This is consistent with the Book of Mormon account, where the LORD can assure a prophet “on the morrow come I into the world.” (3 Nephi 1:13). Nephi's angel had explained the vision as “the condescension of God” that is, his descending with us the ultimate manifestation of his love.

In her Christmas book Barker also discusses how “the words of Gabriel are the key to the original story of the birth of Jesus. What did it mean to be 'Son of the Highest,' that is, to be Yahweh the LORD? The context is the royal rituals of the old temple, when the new king was enthroned and became the human presence of the LORD, and established as his presence and his king upon the earth. The two stages of sonship, the two births, are assumed here, not explained: the relationship with the divine—the Most High and the Son, the eternal generation of the Son; and then his relationship of the divine and human—the Son and his earthly manifestation, the Virgin birth and the incarnation.”¹¹

Starting with Hugh Nibley's *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, LDS scholars have learned to see Benjamin's temple discourse as a royal enthronement ritual.¹² Notice the Benjamin inserts a reference to the Nativity story, including express mention of the role of Mary in his incarnation in Mosiah 3:13, and how his account of Jesus sonship can lead to our become his sons and daughters. In many ways, Christmas is a time to be child-like and to celebrate family. The Christmas story should remind us whose children we are and how our lives should celebrate that knowledge.

Earlier this year, Professor William Hamblin of BYU met with Margaret Barker at the Eagle and Egg in Cambridge, where, among other things, she discussed her Christmas book. See the link here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X2_qOljfCA&feature=PlayList&p=FCDEFC119E840DCF&index=2

9 See Daniel Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah” in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* vol 9, n 2.

<http://www.farms.byu.edu/publications/jbms/?vol=9&num=2&id=223>

10 Barker, xii

11 Barker, 60.

12 See my discussion here: <http://www.meridianmagazine.com/bookofmormon/080519king.html>