

Kevin Christensen

348 Middlegate Dr

Bethel Park, PA 15102

[KevinChristensen54@verizon.net](mailto:KevinChristensen54@verizon.net)

Plain and Precious Things Restored: Why Margaret Barker Matters  
By Kevin Christensen

In speaking at the Joseph Smith Conference in Washington D.C. in 2005, English Old Testament Scholar and Methodist Preacher Margaret Barker began her remarks on the Book of Mormon by asking this question: “Are the revelations to Joseph Smith consistent with the situation in Jerusalem in about 600 BCE?” Barker’s remarks were as remarkable both for her willingness to consider the question directly, and for her unique preparation.

In her first book, *The Older Testament* published in England in 1987, Barker describes the problem she wants to explore: What was the background for the origins of Christianity? To account for striking differences in what has been understood to be the Jewish background and the emerging Christian theology, many secular scholars have been telling an unhappy Christian ministry that many key ideas came as late imports from Greek culture. Barker suggests that a better explanation comes from Palestine itself:

We have to find something appropriate for a group of Galileans, relevant to their needs and aspirations, but sufficiently coherent (and even recognizable) to draw the hostility of Jerusalem Judaism, as a threat to the Law. . . . Our task is to reconstruct a background *quite independent of New Testament considerations*, appropriate to the world of Jesus' first followers, and *known to exist as a single set of ideas* which threatened the Law. . . .

In order to reconstruct such a background, it is necessary to dig deep, and to work back through the writings of several centuries. I shall begin with the pseudepigraphon known as 1 Enoch (Ethiopic Enoch), and shall then devote the rest of this book to establishing the antecedents of this work, which is known to have been used by the earliest Christians. . . . This mythology underlies the creation theology of Romans 8, the exorcisms and miracles of the Gospels, the heavenly archetypes of Hebrews, and the first Temple imagery of the Fourth Gospel. It is the imagery of Revelation, Jude and the Petrine Epistles, and the song of its angels became the Sanctus of the eucharistic liturgy. Little of this is derived directly from Enoch; the process rather has been one of following the Enochic stream to its source, and seeing what other waters have flowed from it.<sup>13</sup>

The background that provides this “single set of ideas,” the source of the Enoch stream turns out to be the temple, but not the Second Temple which stood in Jerusalem. Rather, the stream looks to memories of the First Temple. But it is her focus on the key time and place as the source of the stream of these ideas that is most intriguing.

The life and works of Jesus were, and should be, interpreted in terms of something other than Jerusalem Judaism. This other had its roots in the conflicts of the sixth century B.C. when the traditions of the monarchy were divided as an inheritance among several heirs. It would have been lost but for the accidents of archeological discovery and the evidence of pre-Christian texts preserved and transmitted only by Christian hands.

It is doubly interesting that Barker's search takes her back to the Jerusalem of 600 B.C.E. That brings the Book of Mormon into the arena. Notice that Barker builds her case from recently found documents. When I first read this passage in The Older Testament, I immediately thought of a corresponding prophesy in 1 Nephi 13:40.

These last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them; and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world, and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved.

Notice that Nephi is prophesying here from the Jerusalem around the time of 600 B.C.E. For this prophesy to be fulfilled, we need to find this particular doctrine re-established as a First Temple teaching. That is, writings coming forth via the gentiles after the coming forth of the Book of Mormon must establish that the Judaism of the time was not an absolute monotheistic faith, but rather one that proposes a Father and a Son who is to perform specific salvific functions, and who is identifiable as the Lamb of God. It was a passage in her fourth book *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God*, that began to raise interest in Barker's work among LDS scholars.

There were many in first-century Palestine who still retained a world-view derived from the more ancient religion of Israel [that of the First Temple] in which there was a High God and several Sons of God, one of whom was Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel. Yahweh, the Lord, could be manifested on earth in human form, as an angel or in the Davidic king. *It was as a manifestation of Yahweh, the Son of God, that Jesus was acknowledged as Son of God, Messiah and Lord.*<sup>5</sup>

Doctrinally, of course, this passage is very attractive to LDS readers. More to the point, this passage, and the arguments and evidence that follow, provide a specific fulfillment of Nephi's prophesy. The convergence goes beyond this doctrine, and the identification of the key time and place. For example, in Barker's second book, *Lost Prophet: The Influence of the Book of Enoch on Early Christianity*, we find this passage:

We can now add to our pattern of vision, knowledge, judgement, ascent and angelic status, several more elements: the royal figure called 'a son of man', the Eden temple setting with the river of life giving water, the lamp representing both the presence of God and the Tree of Life whose fruits made man immortal, and the clouds which took a son of man figure to heaven. (Barker, *Lost Prophet*, 56.)

Readers of the Book of Mormon should find this passage particularly inviting. Indeed, in my FARMS *Occasional Paper* on Barker's work,<sup>1</sup> I spent twelve pages elaborating on the connections. That is, in Barker's work, we find a remarkable convergence, and a mutual illumination. We find not only confirming insights, and sympathetic doctrines, but opportunities to discover things in familiar texts that we have never seen before.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies." *Occasional Papers* n2, ed William Hamblin, (Provo, FARMS, 2001).