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Plain and Precious Things Restored, Part 3: Why Margaret Barker Matters
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Last time, I started with a passage from 1st Enoch 93:7-8 that describes the period just before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Babylonians. The description in 1st Enoch reported that “blindness” that was caused those who had forsaken “wisdom.” Canonical references in Jeremiah and Ezekiel cast further light on the blindness and apostasy of that period, and that these passages were supplemented by Jacob’s description of a “blindness which came from looking beyond the mark.” Margaret Barker’s observations on Ezekiel help us see that this “mark” was associated with the anointing of the high priest with the Name of the Lord. We have a picture of willful blindness associated with people in Jerusalem rejecting wisdom as represented by a fountain and a tree of life, someone making deliberate changes to the role of the anointed high priest (that is, the messiah), someone publicly killing prophets, and changing scripture, and rejecting old paths and ancient traditions. So having assembled a preliminary profile of the crimes, the next step is to look to the time and place to see if we can identify “whodunit.”

In looking at the Biblical accounts of the history of the period, one event, and only one stands out in comparison to our profile. This is King Josiah’s reform, which is described in 2 Kings 22-23, and with some significant variations in 2 Chronicles 34-35. Even the approving accounts describe the destruction of the tree of life in the temple (2 Kings 23:5) and public violence (2 Kings 23:20). That Josiah’s reform offers a degree of fit with the profile should raise questions that must be asked, but we must be careful not to answer them too quickly. The reform has been closely identified with an editorial school that scholarship calls the Deuteronomists.¹ This group apparently produced an edition of the books of Deuteronomy, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings during the reign of King Josiah. The Deuteronomists are known as innovators and are known to have edited scriptures in their care. This is important. They worked with texts and traditions that had an established status, including Deuteronomy, but they imposed their own perspectives on those texts.

Their *edition* of Deuteronomy is notable for claiming that God had *not been seen* (Deut. 4:12) and for the claim that possession of their Torah meant that there was no need for anyone to go to heaven to bring the word of God (Deut. 30:11-12). This is despite accounts of *visions* elsewhere in scripture, notably in Exodus 24:9-10, Isaiah 6:1-5, Jeremiah 23:18, 22; 33:3, and Ezekiel 1. These declarations in Deuteronomy challenge the claims of the anointed temple priests such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jacob to provide

¹ See William J. Doorly, *Obsession with Justice: The Story of the Deuteronomists* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

visions. The passages in Deuteronomy deny the possibility of *vision*, which becomes very suggestive in considering the claims 1st Enoch and elsewhere that just before the destruction of the first Temple, that Israel became *blinded*.

A passage in Deuteronomy 4:6 sets out the agenda of the reformers:

Keep therefore and do them [that is, the statutes and judgments of the law] for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. (Deut. 4:6)

During Josiah's reign, the Law was put forth as a replacement for an older form of wisdom. Jeremiah, who knew Deuteronomy well enough to quote or allude to it over 200 times, seems to be commenting on this very passage:

How do ye say, We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us? Lo, certainly in vain made he it; the pen of the scribes is in vain.
The wise men are ashamed, they are dismayed and taken: lo, they have rejected the word of the LORD; and what wisdom is in them? (Jer. 8:8-9)

Richard Elliot Friedman's translation of Jer. 8:8 is stronger than that in the Kings James version: "How do you say 'We are wise, and Yahweh's torah is with us'? In fact, here it was made for a lie, the lying pen of the scribes."² The King James translators were reluctant to describe a Torah as having been falsified, but such a translation appears in the margins as an alternate reading. John Bright also offers the stronger translation. "How can you say, 'Why we are the wise, For we have the law of Yahweh'? Now do but see—the deception it's wrought, the deceiving pen of the scribes."³

Both Lehi and Jeremiah show familiarity and approval of a *version* of Deuteronomy, but this clearly not the same version of Deuteronomy that we have now. For example, the Book of Mormon cites the prophecy in Deuteronomy 18 about a prophet like unto Moses, and frequently refers to the promise that if the people obey they will prosper in the land. However, both Jeremiah and Lehi contradict our current version Deuteronomy on key issues that Barker identifies as defining the reform, indeed, the same issues that define our profile. This should be telling, as it is to observe that all of these key issues concern the role of the anointed high priests.

As Barker explains "When the high priest ascended to heaven/entered the holy of holies, he would have crossed whatever it was that represented the sea or ice or crystal around the heavenly throne. In Deuteronomy such ascents are deemed unnecessary:

² See Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) 209. Interestingly, Friedman argues that Jeremiah was the Deuteronomist. I now find this unpersuasive in light of other evidence and other First Temple imagery and concerns in Jeremiah..

³ John Bright, *The Anchor Bible: Jeremiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1965).

The secret things belong to the LORD our God: but such things that are revealed belong to us and to our children, that we may do all the words of this law... for this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, "Who will go up for us to heaven and bring it to us, that we may hear and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us that we may hear and do it?" (Deut. 29:29; 30:11-13)⁴

While the account of the reform in 2 Kings 22-23 clearly favors Josiah (especially 2 Kings 23:25), we must consider that this account was written by Josiah's supporters, and indeed, by his tutors, by those who implemented the reforms, by the very people who placed him in power when he was eight years old after the assassination of his father Amon (2 Kings 21:24). Although both accounts in the Bible describe the reform as directed against idolatry in Jerusalem, we should look carefully at those histories and compare them to dissenting accounts within and outside the canon.

For example, Jeremiah's call comes in the 13th year of Josiah's reign, when King Josiah was 21. According to the account in 2 Chronicles, the reform begins in the 12th year, when the King was 20. A key problem for scholars exploring the book of Jeremiah has been determining his relationship to Josiah and the reform. None of the commentaries I have read have noticed that after the reform has begun, Jeremiah is called "against the Kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land." (Jer. 1:18). It was these "people of the land" who installed Josiah as King (2 Kings 21:24), and it was the Kings, the princes⁵, and the priests connected to Josiah institutionally (2 Kings 23:4), that implemented the reforms. Ezekiel 22:6-30 contains another more detailed condemnation of these same groups. Zepaniah 3:1-4 has another contemporary condemnation.

Given that 2 Kings portrays Josiah as the perfect king, and that Jeremiah was called during Josiah's reign, why does the lengthy book of Jeremiah have so little to say about either the king or the reform? Most of the passages in which Josiah's name occurs are prefaced by "son of" meaning that they address Josiah's successors to the throne. The few discourses in which Jeremiah clearly refers to Josiah raise questions:

The LORD hath said unto me in the days of Josiah the king, Hast thou seen that which backsliding Israel hath done? (Jer. 3:6)

Israel, the northern Kingdom, had been defeated and exiled by the Assyrians in the days of Hezekiah and Isaiah. Jeremiah shows some sympathy for certain aspects of the reform related to the social justice called for in Deuteronomy. He sympathizes with Josiah's desire to reunite Israel and Judah, and shares the critique of idolatry in the high places of

⁴ Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 134.

⁵ "The Hebrew term behind "princes" is sarim, which refers to government officials, whether of royal ancestry or not (usually not)." John Tvedtnes, in *The Most Correct Book* (Bountiful: Horizon Publishers, 2003) 67.

Judah. However, the discourse in Jeremiah 3 continues with what must be a direct comment on the reform:

Judah hath not turned unto me with her whole heart, but feignedly, saith the LORD. (Jer. 3:10.)

Scholars tend to associate the famous temple discourse in Jeremiah 7 with the appointment of Jehoiakim as king by the Egyptians who had defeated Josiah. The temple discourse is commenting on the effect on the temple of the 10 year reform. “Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?” (Jer. 7:11). In a discourse given during the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim, Jeremiah again refers to Josiah’s time without any indications that Judah gave him heed.

From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon King of Judah, even unto this day, that is the three and twentieth year, the word of the LORD hath come unto me, and I have spoken unto you, rising early and speaking, but ye have not hearkened. (Jer. 25:3)

The one clearly positive reference to Josiah in Jeremiah must be considered in light of the negative context elsewhere:

[D]id not thy father [King Josiah, father of Jehoiakim] eat and drink and do judgment and justice and then it was well with him? He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him: was this not to know me? Saith the LORD. (Jer. 22:15-16)

The reform has been closely associated with a version of Deuteronomy, and that book does require social justice, and shows concern for the poor and needy.⁶ But notice that even while commending Josiah, in contrast to the excesses of Jehoiakim, the repeated “*then it was well with him*” functions to qualify the praise. Since the eight-year old Josiah was installed as king by Jerusalem parties, it was much more important that he have popular support than Jehoiakim, who was an Egyptian puppet. When was it not well with Josiah? Jeremiah clearly agrees with the reform’s stated goals with respect to denouncing idolatry in Judah. So, what was wrong with the reform?

In an address given at a BYU Devotional in May of 2003, Margaret Barker discussed the reform in detail and observed that “Josiah’s changes concerned the high priests and were thus changes at the very heart of the temple.”⁷ She cites Jewish traditions that remembered that the priest of the first temple was remembered as being different than the priest of the second temple. The reform involved Josiah sending Hilkiah into the Holy of

⁶ See William J. Doorly, *Obsession with Justice: The Story of the Deuteronomists* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) and Hugh Nibley, “How to Get Rich.” in *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 178-201.

⁷ Margaret Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” in John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds. *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem* (Provo, Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004) 526.

Holies (2 Kings 23:4), to which only the anointed high priest was to enter, only once a year on the Day of Atonement, and removing and destroying items to which only the anointed high priest had access. One of these items was the “anointing oil,” which tradition remembered as being hidden away by Josiah.⁸ The anointing of the high priest must have been the “mark” referred to in Jacob 4:14. After Josiah’s reform the high priest was no longer “the anointed”, which is what Messiah and Christ both mean. Remember that he reform has been closely associated with a version of Deuteronomy. Barker observes that the sacred calendar in Deuteronomy 16 *does not include the Day of Atonement*. As we have seen, certain prohibitions in our Deuteronomy deny the possibility of *vision*. These kinds of things support the Jacob 4:14 claim that the *blindness* in Jerusalem was caused by “looking beyond the mark,” that is, by rejecting the anointed high priest. It also would explain the theme of Lehi’s first discourse, where he prophesies of a messiah of the redemption of the world,” (1 Nephi 1:19) that is, an anointed high priest and a day of atonement. It fits with Barker’s striking suggestion in her talk at the Joseph Smith Conference at the Library of Congress that the wickedness in Jerusalem that Lehi preached against *was the reform*.

The reform involved removing the Asherah (mistranslated in the Kings James version as “grove”⁹) from the Temple, and not only burning it, but stamping it to powder, and desecrating the powder by casting it on the common graves (2 Kings 23:7). This Asherah was the Menorah, the “Tree of Life”, which is associated with Wisdom both in scriptures (for example, Proverbs 3:13, 18 and Jeremiah 17:8), and in non-Biblical accounts (such as 1st Enoch, The Narrative of Zosimus, 1 Nephi and Alma 32). For example, in Proverbs 3:13, 18 we read “Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and that getteth understanding... She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her.”

The reform included institutional violence. “And he slew the priests of the high places that were there upon the altars, and burned men’s bones upon them.” (2 Kings 23:2). Compare passages in Jeremiah that “also in thy skirts is found the blood of the poor innocents: I have not found it by secret search, but upon all of these. Yet thou sayest, Because I am innocent, surely his anger shall turn from me” (Jer. 2:34-5).

Barker notes that 2 Kings 23:7 that are currently translated as “and he brake down the houses of the sodomites,” the same letters can be read as “the holy ones,” meaning the priests.¹⁰ Besides deposing and killing priests that did not support the new changes, a key element of the reform was the insistence that Jerusalem would be the only shrine, the only temple.¹¹ That Nephi built a temple in the New World (2 Nephi 5:16) shows that he did not agree with that part of the reform.

The life times of Jeremiah and Lehi were punctuated by profound changes. The prophet Jeremiah received his prophetic call during the thirteenth year of Josiah’s reign (Jer. 1:1).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Kevin Barney, “Do We Have a Mother in Heaven?” available at <http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/MotherInHeaven.pdf>

¹⁰ Barker, “What King Josiah Reformed”, 529.

¹¹ Doorly, 53.

Jeremiah was also active as a prophet during the reigns of Jehoiakim (installed by Egypt) and Zedekiah (installed by Babylon), and he witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem. He wrote to the exiles in Babylon from Jerusalem (Jer. 29), but was taken to Egypt by Johanan (Jer. 43:4-7) after the assassination of Gedaliah “who the king of Babylon had made governor” (Jer. 41:2). Lehi received his prophetic call in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, but since his sons were young men at that time, he would be old enough to have witnessed the reigns of Josiah and Jehoiakim. Both Lehi and Jeremiah show familiarity and approval of a version of Deuteronomy, but as we have seen, both Lehi and Jeremiah contradict Deuteronomy on key issues that Barker identifies as defining the reform.

Next time, we shall look at Barker’s reconstruction of the wisdom that the reformers sought to suppress and replace, and show it is appears intact in the Book of Mormon.