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Plain and Precious Things Restored: Part 6. Jesus and the Temple Tradition
By Kevin Christensen

In approaching the New Testament, remember that our texts do not speak for themselves, but become meaningful in the context that we provide. Nephi taught that we cannot understand Isaiah, for example, without knowing something of the manner of prophecy among the Jews. Even those Jesus whom taught directly in the 3 Nephi account were reminded that they could not grasp everything at once, but would have to make an effort to prepare their minds (3 Nephi 17:3). The same principles apply to New Testament study: the text without the context cannot tell us everything we need to know. We have to prepare our minds to bring the most bountiful harvest from the text. Margaret Barker's work brings into focus the importance of the First Temple tradition as a key to bring to our New Testament study. Consider first the importance of the revolutionary discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls:

It was recognized long ago that so much that would have been vital to understanding Christian origins perished after the wars with Rome. Until recently, the Judaism of the time was reconstructed from texts written many generations after those events, and so there were massive anachronisms built into the 'background of the New Testament'. Something of the real situation in Palestine can now be reconstructed from the Qumran material, and it is a very different picture, not the least the different texts of 'familiar' Hebrew Scriptures.¹

The Qumran material is contemporary with the New Testament, and provided a radically different picture of Judaism than the later Rabbinic texts that had formerly been used to describe New Testament backgrounds. And besides a substantial body of non-Biblical texts, Qumran also provided the oldest Biblical texts which turned out to have variant readings in many passages that were important for the Christian interpretations. When such variant readings had been preserved in the Septuagint Greek, it had been possible to argue that the differences between the Greek and the Hebrew could be explained as Christian interpolations. Because the Qumran Biblical materials predate Christianity, this argument no longer holds. With regard to the Masoretic Hebrew text that the Christian world adopted, Barker observed that "The distribution of unreadable Hebrew texts is not random; *they are texts which bear upon the Christian tradition.*"² In comparing the Masoretic Hebrew text with the older Qumran materials and in examining discussions about the scriptures by Jewish and Christian writers, Barker's observations make it clear that the Hebrew canon was defined, not just after the rise of Christianity, but in response

¹ Margaret Barker, "The Secret Tradition" in *The Great High Priest: Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 25.

² Barker, *Ibid.*, 309.

to it.³ A key example is the how there is nothing in the MT of the prophets describes a suffering Messiah who sees the Glory of God, so the story in Luke [24:25-26] presupposes the Qumran version of Isaiah.”⁴

Barker has shown that “the non-priestly Jewish tradition which defined the Hebrew canon and its text, the canon and text adopted by Jerome as the basis for his Old Testament, on the grounds that this was the version that the Jews would accept as the basis for discussion.”⁵

*An unacknowledged problem at the heart of Western Christian biblical study is that the Church, and especially the Western Church, has as its scripture the Jewish Canon and text of the Old Testament, when the evidence shows clearly that the earliest church used very different scriptures.*⁶

The same pattern of non-priestly tradition versus the Temple centered priestly tradition occurs in the selection and exclusion of books.

The non-priestly Jewish tradition also excluded those books such as 1 Enoch which were the repositories of the older priestly traditions. Thus both the text and context of the priesthood disappeared.⁷

Barker also shows that important texts which had been excluded from the Hebrew canon were initially preserved only by the early Christians.

The traditions of the original temple survived intact, but not in those texts chosen, after the advent of Christianity, to become the Hebrew Scriptures. The details of how the Hebrew canon was determined are not known, but legend - and there is no smoke without fire - names an ‘Ezra’ as the one responsible for dividing the 94 holy books into two collections: 24 to be made public, and the remaining 70 to be kept only for the wise: ‘For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of Wisdom and the river of knowledge.’ (2 Esdras 14.19-48). The imagery suggests that these were books from temple tradition, and there is good reason to believe that the books reserved for the wise - and in fact preserved only by Christian scribes - included what we now call the Pseudepigrapha, texts such as 1 and 2 Enoch, which are repositories of ancient temple tradition.⁸

³ LDS students reading her essay “Text and Context” in *The Great High Priest* should find detailed comparisons with the account in 1 Nephi 13: 20-41 both obvious and compelling.

⁴ Barker, *The Great High Priest*, 303-4.

⁵ Margaret Barker, “Text and Context” in *The Great High Priest: Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 308.

⁶ Margaret Barker, “Text and Context” in *The Great High Priest: Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 298.

⁷ Margaret Barker, “Text and Context” in *The Great High Priest: Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 308.

⁸ Margaret Barker, *The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom of God*, 7-8.

Though Christian scribes had initially preserved the non-canonical texts, the adoption of the Hebrew canon by the Christians also corresponds to the abandonment of texts such as Enoch by most of the Christian communities. Such losses were not trivial, but changed the context in which the remaining New and Old Testament texts were read.

*What was assumed by the New Testament writers was a traditional understanding of the temple rituals and the myths of atonement. When the rituals ceased and the myths were no longer recognized for what they were, the keys to understanding the imagery of atonement was lost.*⁹

The most important of the non-canonical texts has been the Book of Enoch, a repository of temple traditions and imagery. Jude quotes Enoch directly, but many other New Testament passages reflect the Enoch world view, and cannot be either recognized or understood without the context provided by Enoch. As strange as the Book of Enoch may seem to modern readers, it also has many important ties to the Book of Revelation, certainly the strangest and most difficult book in the New Testament. Both the Book of Revelation and Enoch contain scenes set in the Holy of Holies in the temple, and thus both represent the lost priestly traditions. Barker observes that “*Since neither the Book of Revelation nor 1 Enoch fits easily into the received picture of Judaism at the time of Jesus and early Christianity, that picture needs to change.*”¹⁰

The Enoch tradition underlies the New Testament as it was originally written, and failure to recognize this seriously distorts our picture of Christian origins and the original beliefs about the Kingdom.¹¹

Consider just how just one aspect of the ministry of Jesus are illuminated by the newly recovered texts. In an article published in *BYU Studies* in 2003, Barker explained that the Qumran Melchizedek text “describes how Melchizedek was to appear in the first week (that is, in the first seven years) of the tenth Jubilee (each Jubilee being forty-nine years). He would proclaim the liberty of the Jubilee year, rescue his people from the power of the Evil One, and restore them to their rightful inheritance. The Anointed One would appear, and the kingdom of God would begin. At the end of the tenth Jubilee, there would be the great atonement, when the angels would be judged and the sons of heavens rescued.”¹² She explains that the “text is constructed around a series of quotations” including “Isaiah 61, where the one anointed by the Spirit proclaims the liberty of the Jubilee year.”¹³ She observes that “Luke records that Jesus was about thirty years old at the time of his baptism (Luke 3:23), so Jesus would have begun his public ministry in the first seven years of that final tenth Jubilee. The link between Jesus and the Melchizedek text is confirmed by Luke’s account of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth. He chose to

⁹ Margaret Barker, “Atonement: The Rite of Healing” in *The Great High Priest: Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 43.

¹⁰ Margaret Barker, *The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom of God* (London: SPCK, 2007), 33.

¹¹ Barker, *Ibid.*, 53.

¹² Margaret Barker, “The Great High Priest” in *BYU Studies* vol 42, n 2-3 (2003), 70.

¹³ *Ibid.*

read from Isaiah 61, the very text that was associated with Melchizedek coming to bring the good news of the Jubilee and the Kingdom of God.”¹⁴

Margaret Barker’s twelfth book, *The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom of God* has just been published by SPCK in London. Her daughter has created a website that introduces Temple Theology, describes her books, and includes several essays on line. See www.margaretbarker.com.

¹⁴ Ibid. 71-2. Also see “The Time is at Fulfilled: Jesus and Jubilee” in *The Great High Priest*.