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A Review of Temple Theology: An Introduction
By Kevin Christensen

Margaret Barker's book *Temple Theology: An Introduction* was one of six books published between 2004 and 2006 that was shortlisted for the Michael Ramsey Prize for Theological Writing. The prize went to another author, but since the prize is administered by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the recognition at this level remains significant. The occasion provides a good opportunity to comment on what non-LDS scholars have found notable in her work.

Much of the fashionable scholarship about Christianity has claimed that what Jesus claimed about himself is different than what the church later claimed about him. This is expressed in terms of early Christology being "low" and later Christology being "high." The idea is that there was somewhere a historical Jesus, and stories about this figure grew and due to influences from Hellenistic cultures. And eventually the man Jesus was replaced by a new Divine Christ composed for the faith. The problem for people of faith, of course, is in the implied difference between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. While the scholars who present such arguments claim these conclusions as having been forced upon them by the evidence, it turns out that "There is then a radical dependence between the reconstructed Jesus and the reconstructed context/model: how the context and social model are understood determines how Jesus is understood."¹ As impressive as any one of these approaches may seem on its own, other equally learned approaches end up with a different picture. Morton Smith offers Jesus as an ancient magician, whereas Vermes offers, a Jewish charismatic healer and exorcist. Scholars such as Borg, offer an itinerant subversive sage. Sanders and Charlesworth offer an eschatological prophet. Where the background for Jesus is the later Rabbinic tradition, Jesus emerges as an inspired rabbi. Where the Hellenistic influences are emphasized, he is presented as a cynic teacher.² While the picture of Jesus changes, rather like devotional paintings from different eras in art history, they tend to create a distance between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith.

¹ "Jesus In Recent Research" at the Catholic Theological Association Conference 1998, published in *The Month* December 1998), 495-505. The author, John McDade, cites W.R.Telford, 'Major Trends and Interpretative Issues in the Study of Jesus' in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of current Research*, eds. B.Chilton & C.A.Evans (E.J.Brill, 1994), pp33-74; Marcus J.Borg, 'Reflections on a discipline: A North American Perspective', *op.cit.*, pp.9-31.

² Ibid.

The effect that such presentations have had on the vitality of Christian belief does not have to be imagined. Not all believers have succumbed certainly,³ but the general effect of such arguments and the authoritative tone that accompanied them has been corrosive in Christian communities. The interest in Barker's work among Christian scholars from a range of denominations follows due to her persuasive argument that Jesus "is the author and finisher of the faith." That is, her Jesus of Nazareth knew who he was, and what he was doing. Her Jesus of history was the Christ of faith.

Those Christian scholars and teachers who have been drawn to Barker's work. In the introduction to her *Temple Theology*, John McDade, the Principal of Heythrop College in London, *Temple Theology* draws attention to the power of Barker's arguments on this very point. And she makes her arguments based on the concepts available in the Palestinian background.

Margaret Barker has observed that "a major obstacle in any attempt to understand Christian origins" is that "it is a very big step indeed away from goats and lambs in the temple to the human sacrifice of one declared to be the LORD, the Son of God." Further she also observes that "*This step is unacknowledged in any account I have read of atonement in the New Testament.*"⁴

She explains that "What was assumed by the New Testament writers was a traditional understanding of the temple rituals and myths of the atonement. When the rituals ceases and the myths were no longer recognized for what they really were, the key to understanding the imagery of atonement was lost."⁵

³ Gary R. Habermas, "Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 3.2 (2005), pp. 135-153. Online at http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/J_Study_Historical_Jesus_3-2_2005/J_Study_Historical_Jesus_3-2_2005.htm "Of these scholars, approximately 75% favor one or more of these arguments for the empty tomb, while approximately 25% think that one or more arguments oppose it. Thus, while far from being unanimously held by critical scholars, it may surprise some that those who embrace the empty tomb as a historical fact still comprise a fairly strong majority." The numbers come from the author's survey of publication trends in the last five years, though not of the influence of those publications. Still, it is an interesting trend to consider.

⁴ Margaret Barker, *The Risen Lord: The Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark Ltd. 1996), 9.

⁵ Margaret Barker, "The Meaning of the Atonement" in *The Great High Priest*, 43.