

# An Improvisation on Margaret Barker's “The Lord Is One”

*Daniel C. Peterson*

It's a privilege to be here, and I want to thank Dr. Barker for a really, really interesting, dense, and rich paper. What I'm going to do is not so much add to it or comment on it as do an improvisation based upon it. The thought that came to my mind as I was reading it—and as I was thinking about it just now as she was reading it—was that, first of all, Latter-day Saints are naturally going to be very sympathetic to an attempt to view the temple as a model of the universe, something of a scale-model representation of reality. That's a theme that is congenial to us, and I appreciate the temple focus here. So I'm going to talk about certain aspects of the temple as I see it, and about some matters related to deification or *theosis* from a somewhat different angle.

The temple is often regarded as a place of ascent; it is the mountain of the Lord's house. And, in many Latter-day Saint temples worldwide, you actually do climb; you physically climb. That is, it's not just a metaphorical climb, but, in very many if not most Latter-day Saint temples, there is actually a rising up in the building. The Salt Lake Temple is a classic illustration of that. And you have a notion of ever-increasing holiness as you go deeper into the structure—just as, on a horizontal plane, the temple in Jerusalem was organized. This is, as I say, sometimes a literal ascent, a physical ascent.

It reminds me of a story in the tradition that I spend most of my time with—the Islamic tradition—that's very closely related to the temple. That is the story called, in Arabic, the *mi'raj* or *isra'*—the night vision or ascension of Muhammad. This is a story that doesn't actually show up in the Qur'an. Although there may be some Qur'anic allusions to it, they

are very unclear if they actually exist at all. But it shows up in traditions that date to a very early time in Islam after the death of Muhammad. Maybe, indeed, and as they claim, they go back all the way to him.

In that story, Muhammad is taken either before or during his ministry, from some place, some physical location, the identity of which varies depending on the account. Sometimes it's said to have happened when he was very young and was in Mecca. Sometimes it's when he was older and was in the city of Medina. In all of the variant accounts, however, he is awakened in the middle of the night by three angels, Gabriel being in the lead, who take him off in a miraculous way from wherever he starts to Jerusalem, and specifically to the Temple Mount, which I think is significant. When he's there on the Temple Mount, he leads the prior prophets in prayer and then there appears to him a *mi'raj*—which can mean *ascent* but can also mean a *means of ascent*, a ladder or a staircase or something like that. And by means of this *mi'raj* he climbs up or ascends through the seven heavens into the presence of God, who is always depicted in these stories as being literally enthroned in the highest heaven.

Now, that story became very, very significant in Islamic tradition. Subsequent mystics tried to replicate it. You get all sorts of variations on it. It's often taken as metaphor. The mystics are trying to ascend into the presence of God through a sort of mental or spiritual process; for them, it's not a literal ascent through physically distinct heavens. Nonetheless, it's an ascent, the journey of the mind to God—the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*—as St. Bonaventure (d. 1274) called it in the West. It also becomes a standard feature in some areas of Islamic philosophy—in al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Kirmani, and others roughly in the tenth and eleventh centuries. They have a philosophical view of the same thing. But their conception of ten steps up to the presence of God is correlated with their understanding of Ptolemaic astronomy; they're passing through the planetary spheres in order to ascend up into the presence of God.

In the case of the founder of Islam, Muhammad ascends into the physical presence of God and receives his commission as a prophet or at least is given instructions for his behavior *as* a prophet or told things that he's commanded to then teach the people. In the mystical experiences of the later Muslim Sufis, they achieve what sometimes is known as *fana'*, which signifies disappearance, vanishing, becoming one with deity—which can obviously be understood as, in a sense, becoming deified.

I was struck by some things that David Larsen said about accounts in which people go up into the divine throne room and see themselves, or something like themselves, seated upon the divine throne. One of the most famous mystical texts from medieval Islam is a text called the *Mantiq al-Tayr* or, in English, *The Conference of the Birds*. In it, the Persian writer Farid al-Din 'Attar writes about a group of birds who get together—it's all metaphorical, of course, all allegorical—to seek the king of the birds, the monarch of the birds. The monarch of the birds is known in Persian legend as the Simorgh. Hundreds of thousands of birds start off, but it's a very difficult path, and they pass through various valleys and ordeals and tests. By the time they get up to the throne room of the Simorgh, there are only thirty of them left. Only thirty have made it. And then, to their astonishment when they get there, upon the throne they see themselves. The climax of the allegory rests upon a pun in Persian: *Simorgh* is not only the name of the mythical bird, but, in Persian, it also means *thirty birds*. This is, thus, very similar to what Larsen was describing.

Now, I'm struck too by the emphasis that Barker places on the idea of the temple officiator, the high priest as a representative, as almost the reality of the Lord himself. I think of our own practice and of the statement in the Doctrine and Covenants that says of a person speaking or acting in the proper way and with legitimate priesthood authority, that it's as if the Lord himself were acting or speaking: "whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (D&C 1:38).

I can't help but think, too, of situations in which temple officiators actually represent the Lord—the earthly presence of the Lord, in a sense—and even of our ordinary mode of speaking in the Church when, in prayers, performatory utterances, ordinances, and talks in church, we conclude with *in the name of Jesus Christ*, as if Jesus Christ himself were there speaking or acting. We very often do this rather perfunctorily and without thought, but it's a serious thing to claim to be acting or speaking in his name. It certainly seems to me to put a real burden on us, to try to make sure that what we are saying or doing is at least roughly the kind of thing that ought to be done or said on that occasion!

I like Barker's emphasis on John 17, on the oneness there in the high priestly prayer. Let me just say something very briefly about that, because it is a powerful, powerful passage.

There is a trend now, in certain areas of Christian thought, to apply John 17 to the doctrine of the Trinity. Some people, not only in Catholic

and Protestant circles but in Orthodox circles, are now formulating a doctrine of the Trinity called *Social Trinitarianism*. It is intended to replace what you might call the older Nicene *Substance Trinitarianism*. In Social Trinitarianism, the idea that there is a perfect oneness between Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost does not make them one substance. Substance Trinitarianism rest on a Middle Platonic or Aristotelian conception that is quite foreign to the scriptures. Instead, Social Trinitarianism makes the three members of the Trinity or Godhead absolutely one in purpose, in mind. An old Greek term that is used for this kind of unity is *perichoresis*, which refers to a sort of perfect mutual indwelling, where each one is perfectly aware of what the other is thinking and feeling. There is, in this view, not a hair's breadth of difference between them, and the idea here is that that kind of social fellowship, that perfect fellowship that exists between the members of the Trinity or the Godhead, is the kind of fellowship into which, to some degree or another, based on John 17, human beings might have the potential of gaining admission. For, if we are to be one as the Father and the Son are one (John 17:11), then it's possible that, if we learn to align our wills perfectly with theirs and to be thoroughly indwelt by their spirit, we might be one with them, too. And then we could be one with them in that divine fellowship, and that, surely, would be a form of deification.

Finally, I wanted to allude just briefly to one area where I think the Latter-day Saints take to the idea of deification in a very special way. It's reflected in the New Testament in Paul's address to the Athenians on Mars Hill. He faces a really interesting challenge there, because he's not able to cite scripture. Using proof texts from the Bible while speaking to a group of pagans atop Mars Hill near the Acropolis in Athens would have been rather pointless; they didn't know anything, or care anything, about the Bible. And so he appeals to them using a different approach, and one of the passages from his speech is of extreme interest to me. This is where, in Acts 17:28–29, he quotes a couple of pagan poets to his pagan audience there. Paul is well-educated; he knows pagan literature, as well as the Bible. So, he says, speaking of God, "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring." Now, one of the interesting things about this passage is that he's not citing a Christian poem or even a Jewish poem. He's quoting a pagan Greek poem by Aratus of Cilicia, a third-century BC writer who is referring to Zeus. Paul is assimilating the God of Christianity to Zeus and saying, I'm going to quote this passage because it's true, just as your poet said, that we are God's offspring.

Now, the Greek word that is translated as *offspring* there is quite interesting to me. It's *genos*. *Genos* is closely (and obviously) related to the Latin word *genus*. But it's also, interestingly enough, related to our word *kind* and, perhaps more significantly, to our word *kin*. Aratus and, therefore, Paul—who quotes Aratus with obvious approval and as an authority—are saying that we are in some sense akin to God. And that is one of the reasons why he then goes on to say to the pagan Athenians that they shouldn't be worshipping stone or wood or anything like that; it's beneath you to do that, he says, because you are God's offspring, and stone and wood are lower than you are. So you should worship a God worthy of you, worthy of the description *God*. And one of the ways he makes that point to them is by saying that they are akin to God.

That is one of the reasons why, it seems to me, *theosis* is something that humans can possibly attain. Because we are of the right kind. I won't go into it here this afternoon, but that's a fundamental ideal of Neoplatonic philosophy, which becomes very influential in Islamic thought and across much of the Mediterranean world—that we are emanations from God and that, because of that, we are in some sense related to God. Therefore, it's possible in a sense—the different schemes for accomplishing it vary from Plotinus to Proclus and Iamblichus and others in the Neoplatonic tradition—to climb back up to God because we are of that nature and because that is where we came from. We come from God and, if we navigate things successfully in this mortal life, in the many tests we have to undergo, we return to God.

This idea of *theosis* or human deification, divinization, is an extraordinarily rich one. I used to think that we Latter-day Saints stood alone in thinking about it and believing in it. But that was an ignorant error on my part, because it's all over the place—in Islam, in Judaism, in Christianity, and well beyond them, in pagan thought and in other faiths and traditions around the world. It's a fascinating theme.

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A native of southern California, Daniel C. Peterson (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young University, where he also founded and, for many years, directed the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative (METI). A former leader of BYU's Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and of its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, he currently serves as chairman and president of the independent Interpreter Foundation. His professional work focuses on Islamic philosophical theology, the biography of Muhammad, and the relationship of the Qur'an to its more ancient Near Eastern background.