Is the Bible Reliable?

A Case Study: Were King Josiah's Reforms a Restoration from Apostasy or a Suppression of Plain and Precious Truths? (And What about Margaret Barker?)

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The Bible's Reliability for Latter-day Saints

The eighth article of faith proclaims, "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly." This statement by itself suggests that the Bible as we have it may or may not be fully and reliably the word of God. In 1 Nephi 13:28, we read, "Many plain and precious things [were] taken away." This passage more expressly indicates that the Bible we have now is indeed not as complete as originally intended. Joseph Smith elaborated on this theme with his statement that "ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors."[1] Nevertheless, Elder M. Russell Ballard reminded us that "we believe, revere, and love the Holy Bible. We do have additional sacred scripture, . . . but it supports the Bible, never substituting for it."[2]

Latter-day Saints fully accept the Bible as scripture while acknowledging that there may be problems within. Traditionally, few Latter-day Saint authors have ventured to point to specific passages of the received text that should be seen as corrupted or in error, even though the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith seem to clearly indicate that such sections exist, somewhere. Over the last few decades, however, some Latter-day Saints have believed they have identified a prime suspect for a corrupt section of the Bible. Other Latter-day Saint scholars are by no means

1. "History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," 1755, Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/127.

2. M. Russell Ballard, "The Miracle of the Holy Bible," *Ensign* 37, no. 5 (May 2007): 81.

convinced. The part of the Bible in question is 2 Kings 22 and 23, which discuss King Josiah's reforms. While not the most famous Old Testament story in Sunday School, this section is seen by Bible scholars as highly relevant to understanding why and how much of the Old Testament took its shape, emphasis, and main themes. This essay considers the case both for and against this part of the Bible's reliability and considers multiple ways Latter-day Saints have responded to it.

Josiah's Reforms: What Is in Them for Latter-day Saints?

Once every four years, the *Old Testament: Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual* drew our attention to King Josiah and the reforms he initiated after temple priests showed him a scroll of forgotten scripture found during a renovation of the Jerusalem temple.[3] The lesson presents a mostly conventional Christian reading of this episode that includes some elements of particular interest to Latter-day Saints. The scroll adjured Israel to worship YHWH alone and stamp out idolatry and any sacrificial practice outside of Jerusalem. To avert the punishments the scroll promised those who forgot the Lord, a highly anxious Josiah sprang into action, purging the Jerusalem temple of idols and shutting down all other sacrificial high places around his kingdom. The Bible even records him stamping out child sacrifice (see 2 Kgs. 22:13–20; 23:3–25). It is easy to see how this seemingly straightforward story of a long-hidden work of scripture emerging to clear away the detritus of apostasy and reinstate true religion might have some special appeal for Latter-day Saints.

However, for many Bible scholars and some Latter-day Saints, this episode is hardly simple, straightforward, or of minor significance. Rather, it is pure dynamite—an obfuscating one-sided account that raises tantalizing questions and requires an against-the-grain reading to uncover what really happened. Is it not a little suspicious that the scroll commands eliminating all potential rival worship sites and that all sacrifices and donations now need to be brought to one place only—the Jerusalem temple administered by, *ahem,* the same priests who just so happened to find the scroll? And what to make of King Josiah's counsel that the priests' temple restoration work not be closely monitored,[4] just before those same

3. Lesson 30, in *Old Testament: Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 144–50.

4. The New English Translation renders 22:7 as follows: "Do not audit the foremen who disburse the silver, for they are honest." In this translation, it is Josiah, not the Lord or the Bible narrator, saying they are honest.

priests produce their ostensibly forgotten scroll (2 Kgs. 22:7–8)? Was Josiah's anguished rending of his clothing genuine (2 Kgs. 22:11), or was this just a showy diversion from his plot, in cahoots with corrupt priests, to consolidate power and set in motion a long process of controlling the writing and editing of scripture to suppress ancient beliefs and practices by means of promoting a fraudulent scroll to justify his actions?[5]

And what exactly were those beliefs and practices to be purged from the temple and Israelite worship? Archeology and scattered textual evidence in the Bible—not fully expurgated by Josiah's uncompromising and long-enduring monotheistic movement—suggest a more plural, even familial, divine conception of a high god accompanied by a consort goddess (or wife), a son who was also a god, and a council of gods.[6] Here, it begins to become clear how Latter-day Saints might also get excited about this alternate view of Josiah, even though secular scholars would likely emphasize the differences between these ancient Israelite concepts and current Latter-day Saint understandings of Mother in Heaven, Jesus Christ, and a divine council. But are these concepts close enough to ancient understandings to be some of the "plain and precious things" taken from the Bible that we read about in the Book of Mormon (1 Ne. 13:28)? Joseph Smith famously claimed, "*Designing and corrupt priests* have committed many errors."[7] Has modern Bible scholarship now identified who some of those corrupt priests were? If so, the Sunday School manual's section on Josiah might need some updating.

In its broad strokes, and minus the interspersed Latter-day Saint reactions, the power-play scenario laid out above is a mainstream scholarly understanding of Josiah and his reforms. Scholars think the "found scroll's" content is today known as the book of Deuteronomy and that the monotheist spirit of Josiah's reforms has colored large swaths of the Hebrew Scriptures—retconning accounts of events from long before,

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5. For an overview of this episode's relevance to understanding the Old Testament in the minds of Bible scholars see Richard Elliott Friedman, "In the Court of King Josiah," in *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 85–99.

6. On archeological evidence of a goddess consort, see William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005). On earlier and more personal, plural, and anthropomorphic conceptions of God and their incomplete elision from the Bible, see James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003); James L. Kugel, *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); and James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2001).

7. "History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1," 1755, emphasis added.

and continuing long after, his reign.[8] Josiah might not be the most well-known Sunday School story, but for scholars of Hebrew scripture, his is *an* important, if not *the* most important, story in understanding who wrote the Old Testament, how its overarching editorial and narrative goals were established, how it was compiled, who compiled it, and why. But do Latter-day Saints really want to embrace this scholarly understanding? After all, secular scholars calling a long-hidden, but newly revealed, scripture a self-serving fraud is an accusation with which we are all too familiar. But on the other hand, might scholars have provided an explanation for "God the Son's" relative absence from the Old Testament when he is omnipresent in the pre–Christian era parts of the Book of Mormon? It is easy to see how Latter-day Saints might see both things to like and things to suspect in both the traditional and scholarly understandings of Josiah and his reforms.

Some Latter-day Saint scholars—mostly in disciplines other than biblical studies—have gone even further than the mainstream understanding on Josiah by eagerly embracing the work of the prolific maverick Methodist Bible scholar Margaret Barker. As a significant influence on well-read Latter-day Saints' reception of Josiah, she deserves some special attention. Barker suggests that some Jews managed to preserve the old understandings of God's wife and son in hidden or underground form for hundreds of years after Josiah's attempts at suppression. She further claims that before his reforms, a Melchizedekian priesthood was better known and seen as legitimate alongside, and probably over, the Josiah-favored temple priests' lineage-based authority after the order of Aaron. According to Barker, pre-Josiah concepts still swirled in underground Jewish circles at the time of Christ—explaining how some Jews were primed to receive and accept Jesus as the Son of God. Others, who stood in the long also-vibrant tradition of Josiah's reforms, were not.

It is easy to see how Barker's books have found a considerable fan base among educated, perhaps even especially religiously conservative and educated, Latter-day Saints despite the books cutting directly, and perhaps uncomfortably, against the grain of the Sunday School manual and the idea that the Bible generally presents a reliable narrative. Unfortunately, it is hard to tell whether the limited and ambiguous nature of Barker's evidence proves her point that ideas and practices were suppressed or whether this lack of evidence *is* evidence that they were never

8. Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 5, 24–26.

there in the first place. She is often dismissed as a fringe figure in the biblical-studies field—including by professionally trained ancient scripture professors at BYU, who tend not to be her acolytes and rarely find her claims worth engaging. Even when what she says differs little from the mainstream take on Josiah, she is still often dismissed out of hand. This might not happen as much if she had a traditional academic appointment or was willing to subject her books to the peer-review process. These are baseline requirements to be taken seriously in academia, but should they be for the pursuit of religious truth, especially in the Latter-day Saint tradition? But neither does our Latter-day Saint faith tradition see reluctance to fully follow scholarly practices, in and of itself, as praiseworthy or evidence of reliability.[9]

Josiah, Margaret Barker, and Latter-day Saint Reception

To gain a fuller understanding of these divergent Latter-day Saint receptions of Barker, a closer look at Josiah and his aftermath is in order—as well as Barker's take on it in particular. The religiopolitical action of Judean king Josiah in 622 BC, often characterized as a comprehensive religious reform, centralized power in the Jerusalem monarchy and priesthood. The core of Barker's argument, made in various ways in her many books, is that Josiah's reforms did irreparable damage to what she calls a "temple theology."[10] This temple theology was a unified outlook made up of a set of related themes that were, according to her, almost entirely excised from the Hebrew Bible by Josiah's court and their successors. However, the core ideas were preserved in later noncanonical writings and kept alive by Christians who saw Jesus in and through the "ancient royal cult."[11] This theology is what Barker attempts to reconstruct through attention to Second Temple–period texts such as *1 Enoch, Jubilees,* and Chronicles, and it includes other core ideas that attract Latter-day Saint attention, such as a once-orthodox divine feminine who was removed from the temple.

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9. The discussion from here until the conclusory section was initially drafted by Cory Crawford, who has agreed to the use of his edited draft in this essay.

10. Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004). For a comprehensive list of Barker's works, see "Publications History," Margaret Barker, accessed July 1, 2018, http://www.margaretbarker.com/Publications/History.htm.

11. Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987).

This is where Barker begins to go far beyond mainstream scholarship that shares her suspicion of Josiah but does not see much evidence of pre-Josianic religion persisting underground for centuries until Jesus's day. Barker's hypothesis allows her both to explain the absence of themes important to her and to create the space into which they can be inserted—or re-inserted, as she would have it—into the narrative. Barker's work caught the attention of Latter-day Saint authors such as Noel Reynolds, John W. Welch, Daniel Peterson, and Kevin Christiansen, who seized on her notion of the alleged removal of temple ideas and motifs as evidence of ancient apostasy—a particularly pronounced moment of the removal of the "plain and precious things" alluded to in the Book of Mormon. Because of this particular interest, Margaret Barker has been a regular presence at Latter-day Saint scholars' conferences and in their edited volumes.[12] Still other publications by Latter-day Saint acolytes distill her work for a wider Church-member audience—generally with little skepticism.[13]

Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History

To understand Barker's work, one must first have a handle on both the history of Josiah's reform and the compositional history of Deuteronomy and the historical narrative that follows it, which is known to scholars as the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua through 2 Kings, minus Ruth in the Protestant and Latter-day Saint canon). Literarily speaking, the book of Deuteronomy presents itself as Moses's speech on the plains of Moab just before his death as the Israelites are poised to cross the Jordan River to enter Canaan. It recounts some of the stories from the Exodus and

12. Among her many publications and public addresses, see, for example, her remarks at BYU published as Margaret Barker, "What Did King Josiah Reform?" in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem,* ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004), 523–42. This volume also contains a chapter dedicated to her theory: Kevin Christensen, "The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker," 449–522. For examples of the variety of her regular Latter-day Saint–organized conference appearances, see, for example, Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Pre-exilic Israelite Religion," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress,* ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2006), 69–82; see also her various conference appearances at the Academy for Temple Studies conferences at https://www.templestudies.org.

13. See, for example, Kevin Christensen, *Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001).

wilderness wanderings, but at its core, and the apparent reason for its existence, is the legal material comprising chapters 12–26, which repeats much of the legislation given at Sinai in Exodus 20–23 but with some important differences that reflect a different historical setting of authorship. Because of a variety of textual indicators and their resonance with very particular historical situations, scholars argue that this legal material (Deut. 12–26) was in fact created in the time of Josiah as the basis of his religious reform.[14]

The Pentateuch did not then exist in its current form, and so the legal material in Deuteronomy was likely meant as a standalone version of Mosaic legislation—a recognizable but substantially modified version of the earlier "Covenant Code" (Ex. 21–23) that may have been in circulation before the Deuteronomic laws. According to 2 Kings 22:8–20, Josiah's officials discovered the "book of the law" in the course of temple renovations and took it to the prophetess Huldah for verification of its authenticity. Since at least the 1780s, careful Bible readers have noted that the affinity between the specifically Deuteronomic laws—as opposed to the Covenant Code or priestly material—suggests that the 2 Kings narrative recounts the discovery of proto-Deuteronomy in the temple.[15]

The creation of Deuteronomy's core of laws, which served as the stated justification for Josiah's reform, was likely a response to Assyrian political and military intervention in the Iron Age Levant that had ebbed and flowed since the ninth century BC. Following Assyria's conquest and annexation of the northern state of Israel in the eighth century, this empire had accepted Judah's bid to become its vassal. In moments of royal transition or perceived weakness, Judah often made successive bids for independence. The most famous bid before Josiah's time was that of his grandfather Hezekiah in 701 BC—a move that resulted in the destruction of Judean cities and very nearly Jerusalem itself. Assyria routinely forced its opponents into vassal treaties, which were formalized on tablets, some of which have been recovered archaeologically. One of these, the so-called Vassal Treaty of (Assyrian king) Esarhaddon (VTE) was even found on a podium in the "holy of holies" of a contemporaneous, though non-Israelite, temple at Tell Tayinat in modern-day

14. For an excellent political and literary overview of the origins and development of Deuteronomy, see Bernard M. Levinson, "Deuteronomy," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible,* ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 192–209.

15. Eddie L. Ruddick, "Elohist," in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible,* eds. Watson E. Mills, Roger Aubrey Bullard (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1990): 373–77.

southeastern Turkey. This suggests that even the biblical narrative of finding the law in the temple may have been intentionally evocative of an international diplomatic practice of the time.[16] Furthermore, the Deuteronomic legislation echoes the texts of such treaties, effectively creating an alternative to the VTE, or what one scholar calls a "counter-history," whereby YHWH, not the Assyrian king, is the suzerain to whom the Judeans owed their loyalty.[17] The Deuteronomic laws were invoked to lay out a comprehensive religious and civic overhaul that included most aspects of public life, including civic and religious institutions.

Although the Deuteronomic project was disrupted by the early death of Josiah in battle, it seems to have lived on during the Babylonian exile and postexilic period, as its curators eventually added successive literary frameworks to make proto-Deuteronomy Moses's recapitulation of the Exodus and Sinai events just before his death on the east side of the Jordan River. It was also probably at this point that the authors compiled and edited the subsequent history of Judah and Israel (that is, Joshua through 2 Kings) from sources available to them, weaving in stories of the legendary judges, kings, and prophets and adding commentary to evaluate these figures as obedient or disobedient to the injunctions prescribed in Deuteronomy.[18] These stories included the narrative of Josiah finding the "book of the law" in the temple and his reformative actions.[19] As best we can guess, they placed Deuteronomy at the head

16. On the discovery of a VTE tablet at Tell Tayinat in Southeastern Turkey, see Timothy P. Harrison and James F. Osborne, "Building XVI and the Neo-Assyrian Sacred Precinct at Tell Tayinat," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 64 (2012): 125–43; Jacob Lauinger, "Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty at Tell Tayinat: Text and Commentary," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 64 (2012): 87–123; Jacob Lauinger, "Some Preliminary Thoughts on the Tablet Collection in Building XVI from Tell Tayinat," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 6 (Fall 2011): 5–10.

17. For the term "counter-history," see Thomas C. Römer, "The Current Discussion on the So-Called Deuteronomistic History: Literary Criticism and Theological Consequences," *Humanities: Christianity and Culture* 46 (2015): 58.

18. Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza already observed in the seventeenth century that Joshua through 2 Kings utilized Deuteronomy as the primary literary lens through which to view the history of Israel. This eventually led to the twentieth-century theory by Martin Noth that a school of elites compiled the history under the influence of Deuteronomy, eventually known as the Deuteronomistic Historian(s).

19. There is a wide variety of argumentation over how to date the beginnings of the Deuteronomistic history. Some scholars see it as basically a continually updated narrative managed by successive kings, and others argue that it did not begin to be formed as a narrative until the exile or postexilic period. For an accessible presentation of these arguments, see Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville, eds., *Reconsidering Israel and*

of this history, and then at some later point a different group, possibly exilic or postexilic priests, took this body of literature and attached it to the newly compiled narratives that we now know as Genesis through Numbers.

Margaret Barker on Josiah's Reforms and Their Aftermath

Beginning largely with her 1987 monograph *The Older Testament* and continuing in her many subsequent works, Barker lays out what she sees as a dominant and coherent "temple theology" that went missing in the wake of King Josiah's reforms.[20] For Barker, Josiah's actions had devastating consequences for "the" older religion of Israel. She argues that Josiah's court effectively removed a system of worship that included, for example, apotheosis (humans becoming gods), the divine feminine (Asherah, Lady Wisdom, and the tree of life), a robust heavenly population of angels (or lesser gods), a veil theology, and YHWH as the son of El Elyon, the high god among many others. This older theology went mostly underground after the Exile, when she claims that the Deuteronomistic group returned from Babylon and came into conflict with those that had stayed behind in Palestine, who, according to Barker, had been keeping the older, and in her view better, traditions alive. At some point, Deuteronomists in the tradition of Josiah were able not only to purge Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history of this older theology but also to redact the entire Hebrew Bible, leaving only traces of the older religion in texts like Genesis 1:26–27, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: . . . male and female" (succinctly suggesting the plurality, bi-genderedness, and corporeality of gods), and Genesis 6:1–4, which speaks of the "sons of God" copulating with the "daughters of [humans]" and, according to one traditional interpretation, having superhuman male offspring. According to Barker, this older religion would mostly resurface much later, largely in noncanonical literature such as *1 Enoch, Jubilees,* and Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) literature, which Barker mines to reconstruct what she sees as lost temple concepts. *First Enoch* is of particular importance to Barker. Even though it postdates 1–2 Kings, she attempts to use its retelling of Kings to build the case that the Deuteronomistic reform was a "disastrous apostasy" that

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Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000); see also Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical, and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

20. See Barker's bibliography in "Publications History."

removed these ideas almost entirely from the textual record.[21] Barker claims the only way to reconstruct what was lost, then, is to extrapolate backward from these later writings.

Barker marshals this argumentation to juxtapose it with her second hypothetical reconstruction—namely, a temple-based Christianity, which she finds to be in complete harmony with her own reconstruction of pre-Deuteronomic Israelite religion. Note that this comparison deliberately circumvents mainstream Judaism, which she identifies by and large with the Deuteronomists. Among her arguments for why the temple is not more obviously a part of Christian texts and practice, especially in the New Testament, is one from silence. According to her, Christians only wrote down what was controversial and not what was generally accepted, and therefore she sees temple theology's relative absence from the Christian canonical textual record as strong evidence of its presence in early Christian thought and practice. At this point, one might be reminded of the skeptical quip used to parody conspiracy theorists: "All of the evidence we don't have agrees with us." Conversely, one might also think of the orally transmitted nature of Latter-day Saint temple ceremonies from Nauvoo until the 1877 dedication of the St. George temple. Here a lack of available written records is indeed an indication of sacredness and importance.

Barker finds hints of the old temple ritual in Christian liturgy, speaking frequently, for example, of "the" Day of Atonement theology that is hidden at the core of the Eucharist—a theology that she reconstructs from an inventive reading of the letter to the Hebrews (particularly Hebrews 7:11's quotation of Psalm 110:4 about being a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek) and not a little inference from Leviticus 16.[22] She sees these connections not as Christians looking backward to Jewish texts in search of meaning but as a heritage carried forward in fragments by a reduced and marginalized tradition that left just enough traces to be pieced together by later close readers.

On the other hand, recognizing early Christians as temple-goers is not a Barker invention. Long before her work, Hugh Nibley synthesized

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21. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 14. Note that she says explicitly that *1 Enoch* sees the *Exile and Restoration* as the time in which "wisdom was despised and impurity installed in the temple," but then she concludes that the period *1 Enoch* was commenting on was instead the pre-exilic Deuteronomic reform.

22. Laid out in Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 39, 44, 52, 82, 122, 268.

evidence for early Christian temple worship. Terryl L. Givens wrote, "Luke records matter-of-factly a time when 'Peter and John were going up to the temple' to worship, and 'there is an abundance of evidence,' as S. G. F. Brandon writes, 'that the Jerusalem Christians continued faithful in their reverence for the Temple and in their observance of its cultus.'"[23] Marcus von Wellnitz notes, "It appears obvious that the early Christians not only had their Sunday services, either in a Jewish synagogue or a member's domicile, but also that they still retained the periodic visit to the temple and saw no conflict in the dual nature of their worship."[24] Though much of what transpired in the temple at Jerusalem involved sacrificial offerings, the Temple Scroll discovered at Qumran envisions an eventual return to the temple's ancient purpose: "the renewal of the covenant made at Sinai, i.e., the temple ordinances that were present before; from the beginning, the building was merely to accommodate them."[25]

In another move that has delighted her Latter-day Saint fans, perhaps the most important link Barker sees is the one between Yahweh and Jesus, both being understood by her as the son of the Most High, the anointed ruler-to-come lost in the rubble of Josiah's apostasy.[26]

Thus, Barker's intense focus on Josiah, Deuteronomy, and the Deuteronomistic history derives from her larger project that is thoroughly and unabashedly a Christian enterprise.[27] Her main objective is to connect *Christianity* to a First Temple uncorrupted by what would become the dominant strain of Judaism, and to do so she needs to be able to point to the moment things changed, when those temple elements were

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23. Terryl L. Givens, *Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought; Church and Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 67, quoting Acts 3:1 and S. G. F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church: A Study of the Effects of the Jewish Overthrow of A.D. 70 on Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1951), 263.

24. Marcus von Wellnitz, "The Catholic Liturgy and the Mormon Temple," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 1 (1981): 5.

25. Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 52.

26. See Barker, *Great Angel,* for her fullest exposition of this argument.

27. This is not a criticism but an understanding of her work as less an attempt to understand the Hebrew Bible we have now on its own terms and more as an attempt to read between the lines to link it to early Christianity. Perhaps the most manifest confirmation of the overt Christian valence of her project is in her introduction to Barker, *Older Testament*—a work that suggests it might be about lost teachings of the Hebrew Bible but which consists mostly of a discussion of New Testament scholarship, because that is the background for understanding Jesus that she seems more interested in explaining than the history of Israelite religion.

lost to the record of both Israel and early Christians. She sees Josiah's "reform" (she also calls it "alteration" and "apostasy") as that moment, one which had cascading effects for the Hebrew Bible. Her stated goal is to root early Christian concepts about Jesus in a First Temple context, but one that must be recovered in order to make the connection. It is with that goal in view that she argues for a lost "temple theology" (hence "older testament") that originally resembled something that the earliest Jewish Christians appealed to in order to understand Jesus, another conception that must also be recovered and reconstructed.[28] Thus it bears keeping in mind that she is reconstructing not one but two theologies hundreds of years apart that she argues had once been dominant, remarkably similar to each other, but different from both Judaism and later Christianity.

Possible Reasons for Latter-day Saint Barker Enthusiasm

Before moving on to the reception of Barker's work in the field of biblical studies, it is perhaps worth pointing out how the Latter-day Saint ground in which Barker's work flourishes (even garnering a mention on her website) was primed to receive it. Many of the Latter-day Saint champions of her work point to aspects of the restored gospel that dovetail quite readily with Barker's work, especially on issues where we are distinct from most Protestants: temple culture, apotheosis, the divine feminine, and apostasy. Barker's Latter-day Saint champions see in her work a key to getting at hidden aspects of Israelite religion that Church members understand as having been current during the lives of Lehi and Nephi, the inaugural Book of Mormon prophets whose story is, remarkably, contemporary with Josiah's reforms in late seventh-century Jerusalem.[29]

Barker's methods also evoke those of Hugh Nibley (1910–2005), the titan of Latter-day Saint apologetics and scholarship on the ancient world, whose influence is still strongly felt in Church circles. In many ways, Barker can be understood as filling the void left by Nibley (with the added benefit of her presumably nonpartisan Methodist affiliation). Her wide-ranging methods and prolific publications that resonate with

28. Barker, *Older Testament,* 5–6; see also Barker, *Great Angel*; and Barker, *Great High Priest,* among many others.

29. See Barker, "What Did King Josiah Reform?" as well as Kevin Christensen, "The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem,* 449–522.

the Myth-and-Ritual school are similar to Nibley's.[30] Her assertion that lost temple teachings can be recovered piecemeal through creative readings of widely divergent texts and her skepticism of a discipline she claims has not properly understood its object of study in centuries of labor, may also remind readers of the late great Latter-day Saint scholar.[31]

Other affinities are worth pointing out. According to Kevin Christensen, Barker has remarked that she finds herself more comfortable outside academic institutions in order to "keep [her] academic freedom."[32] This may resonate with the demographic in which Barker's work is most enthusiastically received—namely, among Latter-day Saint thinkers without doctoral training in biblical studies. This point is intended as an observation of patterns of correlation, not necessarily as a means of discrediting her work. She activates and invigorates a Latter-day Saint tradition of *amateur* scholarship (in the etymological sense of the word, as something that derives from one's untrained passion rather than vocational expertise). Such thinking at the margins often yields productive conversations in a push-pull dialectic that can serve to refine and sharpen ideas and epistemologies.

There has not yet been a full critical response within Latter-day Saint circles that would take advantage of this dialectic.[33] So far, Latter-day Saint scholars with doctoral training in the Bible and ancient Near Eastern religions seem to have mostly found it best to refrain from much comment on her work, leaving positive, uncritical attention to enjoy a heyday. This positive affinity is a double-edged sword, however, since

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30. The "Myth-and-Ritual School" is a term for a now long-out-of-fashion approach to ancient texts that posited a close connection between performance and narrative, and even that scholars can reconstruct rituals underlying existing mythological and other texts. For a brief orientation to the ideas and the main theorists, see Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61–78; and Robert A. Segal, ed., *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998). Thanks to Taylor Petrey for pointing out this similarity between Nibley and Barker.

31. See, for example, her claim in *Older Testament,* 1: "What I have done is select from a wide range of material sufficient to formulate a theory which brings together many of the problems of this field, and presents them as different aspects of a fundamental misreading of the Old Testament."

32. Christensen, *Paradigms Regained,* 4. He does not provide a citation for this quote, instead calling in the footnote for the reader to "notice the simplicity of her solution."

33. David Seely has challenged the uncritical absorption of Barker's views in his conference presentation, "The Book of Deuteronomy and the Book of Mormon," Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, Georgia, November 23, 2015.

it leaves Latter-day Saint apologists open to the same critiques as those leveled at Barker's work, to which critiques we now turn.

Scholarly Critiques of Barker's Work

Many of Barker's main points are actually fairly uncontroversial in biblical studies: that many Israelites were poly- or at least henotheistic; that this very likely included worship of a goddess (often Asherah); that Josiah's reform cut against older, more decentralized traditions that were more widely distributed geographically; that the temple was theologically generative and its influence felt in a variety of narratives; that Enochic Judaism may have been a reaction to Zadokite Judaism; that some early Christians found meaning and identity in texts about the temple and still participated in its practices before its second destruction; and generally that Bible sources are products of particular schools with agendas and points of view and do not represent the full range of religious belief or activity in any given period.[34] The Bible as it has come to us often manifests the hallmarks of theological disagreement and bears witness to struggles for priestly and prophetic authority. Where the discipline takes consistent and serious issue with Barker is in her methods, or lack thereof, that lead her to propose overly ambitious reconstructive scenarios, with the result that her distinctive conclusions have not made significant inroads in the field.

Reception of Barker's work among biblical scholars can be summarized as appreciative of the general creativity of her readings but severely critical of the soundness of the evidentiary foundations on which she constructs her grand theological edifices, which are "undermined by serious problems of fact and method."[35] As eminent Enoch scholar George Nickelsburg puts it in his review of *The Older Testament,* Barker's work "is repeatedly marked by two basic methodological flaws: the assertion that possibility is fact, and the assumption that a rhetorical

34. On these points, see the discussion, the bibliography, and especially the preface in Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), xii–xxxviii; Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel,* trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); Levinson, "Deuteronomy"; Gabriele Boccaccini and John J. Collins, eds., *The Early Enoch Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); and Timothy J. Wardle, *The Jerusalem Temple and Early Christian Identity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

35. Michael C. Douglas, "Book Note: *The Great Angel,*" *Journal of Religion* 73, no. 4 (1993): 661.

question will receive an answer that supports the author's hypothesis."[36] Similarly, H. G. M. Williamson, Emeritus Regius Professor of Hebrew at the University of Oxford, concluded that although Barker's thesis in *The Older Testament* was creative, for her "absent or contrary evidence is the result of revision; fragmentary evidence testifies to what once was; material that might fit becomes strong evidence in favor, etc."[37] More recently, Mary Coloe found *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* dissatisfying because "Barker's process lacks solid argumentation, evidence, and a clear methodology. The work progresses by inference and an accumulation of text references without establishing the necessity that these texts be read intertextually. Statements are simply made without providing sufficient, and sometimes any, evidence in support. The accumulation of texts certainly suggests what Barker is proposing, but suggestion is not the same as evidence."[38] Reviews also commonly critique her emendations of the Hebrew text to fit her objectives, her critically problematic dating of sources, and her citing texts without attention to their contexts.[39]

At some level, all efforts to get to an earlier, "pristine" stage of belief are confronted with the same inherent problems and are open to the same criticisms—namely, how to determine, from later sources, what is a reemergence of a genuinely old tradition and what is the product of later syncretism and creative re-imagining; whether it is ever necessary to posit a hidden strand of theology that was not generated by other needs and forces; and how to determine what counts as "genuine"—on whose authority would this even be determined? And, finally, how to

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36. George W. E. Nickelsburg, "Book Review: *The Older Testament*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 336–37. This is also acknowledged more recently by Nicholas King in an otherwise glowing review: Nicholas King, "Book Review: *King of the Jews*," *Heythrop Journal* 58, no. 2 (2017): 328–29. Similarly, Jorunn Økland takes issue with Barker's unsophisticated "hermeneutical stance" in an otherwise positive review of Barker, *Temple Theology.* Jorunn Økland, "Book Review: *Temple Theology,*" *Theology* 108, no. 843 (May 2005): 213–14.

37. H. G. M. Williamson, "Book Review: *The Older Testament,*" *Vetus Testamentum* 38, no. 3 (1988): 381.

38. Mary Coloe, "Book Review: *Temple Themes in Christian Worship,*" *Review of Biblical Literature* (January 2009). See Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

39. See William Adler, "Book Review: *The Great Angel*," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1993): 795–97; Paul Owen, "Monotheism, Mormonism, and the New Testament Witness," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement,* ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 271–314, especially 303–8.

prevent the anachronistic retrojection onto the past of one's own outlook and assumptions about historical development.

Even with these critiques in mind, it is still not entirely clear that the rejection of Barker's conclusions by her relevant scholarly community can be attributed *entirely* to her problematic methods. Might some of the reaction also stem from her own choice to stand apart from that community by not participating in identity-defining practices such as peer-review? And her conclusions are certainly strikingly revisionist in ways that threaten fundamental conceptions regarding both Jewish past and Christian beginnings. All these factors could well cause her to not be given the same benefit of the doubt enjoyed by other biblical scholars when they also sometimes propose broadly creative dot-connecting speculations as the most likely historical scenarios—which is often the case even in mainstream Bible scholarship when compared to other fields. But these observations only suggest a stretched room for possibility that there is space enough in our big complex world for her to be onto something. They in no way make it more likely.

Implications for Latter-day Saints

Latter-day Saint writers who ground their theology in Margaret Barker's work open themselves to the charges of unsound reasoning leveled at her.[40] Further, the minimal Latter-day Saint criticism of Barker's work has also meant that many of her conclusions' ramifications for our theology that do not fit so nicely with current Church practice and belief have gone unexplored.

For example, doing away with Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history means understanding a major portion of the Hebrew Bible as historically suspect or outright unreliable.[41] Since the reforms Josiah initiated are thought to have inspired generations of redactors who widely shaped the received text as it has come to us in our day, any suspicion of 2 Kings 22–23 is hard to limit to these two chapters alone and may open a can of worms bringing large swaths of the Bible into doubt. This possibility could be opened up by the eighth article of faith's declaration that the Bible is the word of God "as far as it is translated correctly," but it could also mean throwing out quite a few theological

40. As, for example, in Owen, "Monotheism, Mormonism, and the New Testament Witness," 301–8.

41. Owen also makes this point in "Monotheism, Mormonism, and the New Testament Witness," 303.

babies with the supposedly apostate bathwater. Are Church members really ready to label as ahistorical, even fraudulently apostate, virtually all of Deuteronomy and the major historical books of the Old Testament? Deuteronomy contains some of the fullest and most intricate expressions of bedrock theological ideas in the restored gospel, such as covenants and divine love, referenced approvingly by Jesus himself! "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Jesus in Matt. 4:10, referencing Deut. 6:13).[42] Following Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomistic historians articulated what Latter-day Saints may recognize as a "pride cycle" in Judges and identified faithful and unfaithful monarchs throughout 1–2 Kings—an approach that may have given rise to these themes' prevalence in the Book of Mormon narrative.

A second point is that Barker's interpretive practices require reading against the grain of scripture—a kind of "hermeneutics of suspicion," which might splash over onto our reading of Restoration scripture. That is, in order for Barker to discover the lost temple themes in Hebrew texts, she must often adopt an antagonistic stance to the textual tradition she is examining. Must one also adopt such a contrary stance vis-à-vis the Book of Mormon in order to make it sing with temple themes? Does this mean that we should view suspiciously the prophet Mormon—whose editorial voice we hear throughout the Book of Mormon—as another Josiah who removed and suppressed such themes? Does the nonappearance, or at best minimal and much subdued appearance, of Barker's "temple themes" (including Wisdom and the Goddess) in the Book of Mormon suggest that its authors were also victims of a suppressive editor's hand, or that Joseph Smith as its translator inherited a post-Josianic tainted set of theological ideas?[43]

Third, although Latter-day Saint leaders are sometimes enthusiastic about the *existence* of a Goddess—usually called Heavenly Mother or Mother in Heaven—few, if any, would encourage her *worship* as

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42. See Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

43. Daniel Peterson provides a Barker-esque reading of Nephi's vision and proposes that, in fact, the Goddess may be a hidden presence in the Book of Mormon. Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25, 80–81. Peterson readily admits that the references are deeply cryptic and allusive, requiring much creative deciphering. His reading is by no means the plain and obvious meaning of the text for a modern reader, at least. But why is it not? Barker provides an answer for such subtle obfuscation—suppression and apostasy. Do we want to go there with the Book of Mormon composition process?

permissible within the mainstream Church.[44] But this is precisely what Barker says was lost—not merely the knowledge of a Goddess but the removal of both her presence and the prayers and ritual worship activities directed toward her in the temple. Thus, championing Barker's claim that the feminine divine was removed from the temple might be somewhat of a headscratcher coming from members of a Church whose temples are as bereft of Goddess worship as was, apparently, Jerusalem's in the aftermath of Josiah's reforms.

Although these issues might challenge our enthusiasm for Barker's ideas, they also point to something more positive—Barker's strong vision and prolific and provocative output have drawn Latter-day Saint scholars and laypeople a little bit deeper into engagement with the Bible, biblical scholarship, the study of Second Temple interpretation, and early Christianity. Reflecting on things overlooked in our reception of Barker's work is an occasion to reflect on key points of our theology. The energy generated by her work among Latter-day Saints shows that, at least in some circles, these texts and ideas are not mere relics salvaged from the dustbin of history but remain vibrant sources of theological creativity for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Since many, if not most, Bible scholars would also invite us to counter-read the 2 Kings account of Josiah's reforms, our community's disproportionate focus on Barker still begs for further explanation. One reason may be that the biblical-studies consensus offers relatively few widely spread dots to connect and a few broad generalities of possible resonance with the restored gospel's overarching historical themes of apostasy, restoration, plurality of gods, pre-Christian-era understandings of a savior Son of God, and possible corruption of the Bible. Barker's work, in contrast, proposes vivid specific examples of details such as an ancient belief in a Mother in Heaven, a Melchizedek priesthood, Christ as part of pre-Christian era Hebrew religion, and a temple-focused earliest Christianity. She even proposes a specific instance of the removal

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44. David Paulsen and Martin Pulido counted hundreds of references in official venues to counter the claim that no mention of Heavenly Mother is permitted. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "'A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 71–97. But beyond the mention of her existence, Latter-day Saints have by no means developed a robust theology of or set of ritual practices directed toward her—apart from the oblique attention paid to her in the occasional singing of the hymn "O My Father." See Eliza R. Snow, "O My Father," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292.

of "plain and precious things" alluded to, but not identified by Bible chapter and verse, in the Book of Mormon. Perhaps what she offers us is too good *not* to be true. But, perhaps unfortunately, that does not mean that it is.

Another reason for Margaret Barker's enthusiastic reception may be her personal story's more-than-passing resemblance to Joseph Smith's—a solitary individual outside the scholarly establishment gathers together scattered ancient remnants, revitalizes marginalized themes, and restores them to their proper order to tell a coherent and compelling story of true religion lost, then found again. It helps too that the story Barker tells corresponds, on a number of key points, quite nicely with the one revealed through Joseph Smith. But we have Joseph Smith for this. Do we really also need Margaret Barker—especially if carrying water for her work might discredit Restoration truth claims by association?[45]

Bible scholarship, even at its most sober, is a field characterized by best guesses, tentative conclusions, and dot-connecting with far fewer available data points than most scholars would want. Not usually, but occasionally, the wildest guesses might jump up the plausibility scale with the help of newfound evidence. Barker's thesis may someday get a boost of this variety. Or the truth may turn out to be something not best represented by either Barker or her critics. With or without her role in drawing our attention to it, the question of how to think about Josiah's reforms remains a compelling one for thoughtful Latter-day Saints interested in the Bible as well as in its construction and reception.

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45. The following story from the life of Elder Bruce R. McConkie provides an interesting illustration: "While returning from a conference assignment, he was reading [a book] while waiting for a plane and discovered some material by a sectarian scholar that harmonized perfectly with the restored gospel. As he boarded his flight, he met Marion G. Romney, then a member of the First Presidency, who was also returning from an assignment. He said, 'President Romney, I have got to read this to you. This is really good stuff,' and proceeded to share his newfound treasure. When he was finished, President Romney said, 'Bruce, I have to tell you a story. A few years ago I found something that I thought was remarkable confirmation of Mormonism written by one of the world's great scholars. I read it to J. Reuben Clark, and he said, "Look, Marion, when you read things from the great scholars of the world and they don't agree with us, so what? And when you read something like that and you find they are right on the mark and they agree with us, so what?"'" Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Bruce R. McConkie Story: Reflections of a Son* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 252.

Nonbinary Interpretations of Josiah and Conclusions

Some Latter-day Saint scholars have eschewed binary approaches to the question of whether Josiah's reforms were good or bad, seeing the many themes of ancient Israelite religion, both before and after Josiah, as influences on the Book of Mormon. Grant Hardy sees, starting with Lehi and Nephi, an "unorthodox Deuteronomist" editorial tone throughout the Book of Mormon.[46] On one hand, the text presents a straightforward Proverbs-style worldview where the wicked are punished with plagues, wars, and afflictions, while the righteous prosper—history being understood to show a repetitive cycle of repentance, prosperity, backsliding, punishment, and repentance. These understandings presumably continue from the time of Josiah and Huldah. In the Book of Mormon, there is little if anything similar to the book of Job's depiction of severe afflictions besetting a righteous man (so God can win a wager with Satan!) or Matthew 5:45's observation that God sends rain on both the just and the unjust.[47] Second Nephi 28:8's (along with Isa. 22:13's) disapproving reference to the attitude of "eat, drink, and be merry" counters Ecclesiastes 8:15—another non-Deuteronomist section of the Bible—which seems to consider "to eat, and to drink, and to be merry" as one of several possibly valid approaches to life.

On the other hand, despite these Deuteronomist resonances, what makes the Book of Mormon's editorial choices "unorthodox," or even

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46. "The [Book of Mormon] sees itself in continuity with the Bible—describing the same God, the same covenants, the same prophetic impulse and hope of redemption—and the basic story can be regarded as a sequel to the Deuteronomistic History." Personal conversation with Grant Hardy, June 10, 2020. This theme also comes up in Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and in his essay, "The Book of Mormon and the Bible," in *Americanist Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, ed. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 107–35. "The book . . . adopts a Deuteronomistic perspective with a divine injunction that is repeated some twenty times: 'Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper in the land; and inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments, ye shall be cut off from my presence' (2 Ne. 4:4)." Hardy, "The Book of Mormon and the Bible," 108.

47. The closest instance to something like this in the Book of Mormon may be the burning alive of blameless believers that Alma and Amulek were forced to watch (Alma 14). But the in-text interpretation brings even this horrific episode into a Deuteronomistic framework where the righteous are blessed and the wicked are punished. Alma 14:11 proclaims that the Lord ultimately received the faithful martyrs "up unto himself, in glory" into an afterlife of eternal happiness, and that he gave the wicked enough rope so that "the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just."

counter-Deuteronomist, is the overwhelming presence of references to Jesus Christ as God and the Son of God. This grates directly against "orthodox" Deuteronomists' militant monotheism. Lehi's family seems not to have fully shared this particular point of the worldview ascendant in Judah in their day. This might explain some of Lehi's persecution in Jerusalem at the time and stem, in part, from the less than fully monotheistic traditions inherited from their tribe of Manasseh ancestors who were, presumably, refugees from the Northern Kingdom's fall to the Assyrians many years before.

Likewise, Julie M. Smith sees the tumultuous and contemporaneous-to-Lehi events of Josiah's temple restoration and Huldah's validation of the ostensibly recovered scroll as perhaps the most important immediate socio-religious context out of which the Book of Mormon narrative emerges.[48] According to Smith, beginning with Lehi, the Book of Mormon seems in various ways to follow, counter, and react to these formative events throughout its many pages chronicling a long history. Smith wonders if Book of Mormon authors' concerns about not only the importance of records but also of chronicling their chain of custody were set in motion by Lehi's noticing around him the results in Judah of *both* having forgotten about a sacred record *and* the understandable suspicions that likely arose when a record suddenly appeared, seemingly from nowhere, claiming legitimacy. Smith proposes that "Huldah's long shadow" may have influenced the portrayal of the Mulekites' ignorance of the law and their own history and identity because they failed to preserve and remember scripture.[49]

Perhaps Huldah's shadow can also be seen in the book of Omni's narrative devolution to reporting virtually *nothing but* the record's chain of custody. As a response to suspicions about the provenance of Josiah's "found" temple scroll, had "If you forget everything else, at least remember to record this record's chain of custody!" possibly been drilled into record custodians' minds since Lehi's time? Smith also wonders if Josiah's temple restoration events may have impressed sacred records' importance so much on Nephi that he was primed to believe the command that "it is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief" in the case of Laban's withholding of the brass plates.[50]

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48. Julie M. Smith, "Huldah's Long Shadow," in *A Dream, a Rock, a Pillar of Fire: Reading 1 Nephi 1,* ed. Adam S. Miller (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2017), 16.

49. Smith, "Huldah's Long Shadow," 7–8.

50. Smith, "Huldah's Long Shadow," 7–8; 1 Nephi 4:15.

Smith also makes the case that the Book of Mormon's lack of prophetic female voices can more reasonably be seen as evidence of a form of Nephite apostasy in the light of Huldah's apparently well-established and highly respected role as a prophetess. The king came to her and not vice versa, apparently as she was the obvious person to authoritatively pronounce the scroll's legitimacy and what to do about it.[51] Smith wonders if Daniel Peterson might be onto something in interpreting Lehi's vision as containing a restorative reference to a divine mother. And Smith proposes that, in Lehi's mind, perhaps Josiah's reforms were "fundamentally sound but slightly excessive" and that Lehi's tree of life vision may have been a subtle "recorrection of Josiah's overcorrection."[52]

Such nonbinary understandings may be a way out of the "what to think of Josiah" conundrum. A number of times in scripture, the Lord seems to command something that was not his first choice, or he institutes an order of things for humans that does not conform to an expressed ideal as closely as it might. For example, the Lord did not want Israel to have a king, for good reasons that Samuel explains (1 Sam. 8:10–18), but then he later not only allowed a monarchy but gave it his divine sanction—calling even troubled King Saul "the Lord's anointed" (1 Sam. 24:6, 10; 26:11). Doctrine and Covenants 19 suggests that the Lord may be countenancing an overreading of how the word "eternal" actually applies to afterlife punishment, since this understanding has proved useful in prodding people to repentance: "Wherefore it is more express than other scriptures, that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men" (D&C 19:7). Perhaps most famously, the law of Moses was reinterpreted in Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible as an ad hoc substitution for a higher, originally intended gospel fullness.

What all these scenarios have in common is the Lord responding to human weakness and imperfection. Might something similar have been at work with Josiah's reforms? Perhaps God commanded (or just tolerated) them because they corrected some heinous aspects of the preceding situation. Yes, God has a wife. Yes, he has a son. Yes, in the heavens, gods are plural and familial as Joseph Smith later taught. But maybe these truths were just too easy for ancient Judah to confuse with the idolatrous religious beliefs of the surrounding societies that they were supposed to avoid. Maybe the Jerusalem temple practices in Josiah's time were indeed too influenced by the pagan practices of other nations.

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51. Smith, "Huldah's Long Shadow," 6–7.
52. Smith, "Huldah's Long Shadow," 6.

Maybe what Judah needed, for a time, was to make a clean, even extreme, break to purify its practices. Maybe Josiah and his priests' militant and uncompromising monotheism, "overcorrecting" as it might have been, was just the ticket. Yes, this monotheism might have made it harder to accept Christ as part of the Godhead later on, but at the time, Josiah's reforms may have been solving a more immediate problem—like stamping out child sacrifice. Might this worthy goal have warranted the use of any ideology that could get the job done, even if the cost was oversimplifying more multifaceted truths for a time?

Whether or not anything like this scenario was the case, the understandings above are worth considering along with the traditional understanding of Josiah as righteous reformer; the prevalent scholarly view of him as an agenda-driven power consolidator/narrative reshaper worried about the Assyrians; and Margaret Barker's view of him as a suppressor of a religion that was better, more beautiful, and more richly populated with divine beings. These various understandings are all full of wonderous ideas and potential resonances with the restored gospel. These possibilities are all worth pondering to our greater appreciation of how a multitude of possible Bible meanings might edify us and to revel in the mysterious ways of the Lord.

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