

Response to Margaret Barker's "The Lord Is One"

David J. Larsen

I appreciate the opportunity to be here and to give a brief response to what Margaret Barker shared with us. I would like to talk about some of the ideas she explored and perhaps how we may apply them to our LDS scriptures to better understand what we are reading there. Barker touched on the idea of the ascent to heaven and the fact that we can find this ascent, this journey to the heavenly holy of holies, in the writing of Isaiah and other prophetic texts in the Bible. There is so much to consider as we look at these texts. We can imagine these prophets ascending into heaven and standing before the Lord and what these experiences would have entailed. Margaret Barker has greatly helped explore that world.

I wanted to examine somewhat further some of the ascent texts that we can find. Barker has suggested that a lot of these types of texts, describing the journey to the throne of God, did not make their way into the biblical writings because of prejudice against the older temple cult. However, if we look at some of the apocryphal texts or pseudepigraphal texts that circulated in that second temple period, we see many aspects of the ancient temple cult reappear. Barker mentioned Enoch ascending to heaven and standing there in the divine council. Some interesting aspects of that tradition play into this idea of becoming one with the Lord. James VanderKam described a tradition found in several ancient Jewish texts that expresses the notion that humans somehow have a heavenly double or a counterpart in heaven, and when

they ascend to heaven, they find themselves, or are shown themselves in vision, sitting upon the throne of God.¹

Andrei Orlov has explored this idea and found similar concepts in the Enoch text known as *Second Enoch*. In 2 *Enoch* 33, the patriarch Enoch is installed in heaven as the heavenly scribe. Then God commands Enoch to write certain things—the things he has learned in heaven—and then sends him back to earth to share the content of these writings. However, when he commands Enoch to go down and share these writings, God declares that they are things that he himself has written, although he had commanded Enoch to write them. So we start to see this overlapping of the role of God and the role of Enoch. God is taking on Enoch's role, Enoch is taking on God's role. Enoch is promised a throne in heaven, he is given a position very similar to God's, and we see this theme running throughout these texts.²

Similar traditions in these texts involve the patriarch Jacob. A scholar named Jarl Fossum has discussed the idea that Jacob is taken up to heaven, and he sees his image engraved on the throne of God.³ Then the angels show him that his image is not only engraved on the throne, but he is somehow identical with the form of God on the throne. These texts are very confusing. Christopher Rowland has similarly proposed that in these texts we see Jacob's image as "identical with the form of God on the throne of glory."⁴

1. James C. VanderKam, "The Angel of the Presence in the Book of Jubilees," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 7 (2000): 378–93; James C. VanderKam, "Righteous One, Messiah, Chosen One, and Son of Man in 1 Enoch 37–71," in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity, The First Princeton Symposium on Judaism and Christian Origins*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth and others (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 182–83.

2. See Andrei Orlov, "Moses' Heavenly Counterpart in the *Book of Jubilees* and the *Exagoge* of Ezekiel the Tragedian," *Biblica* 88, no. 2 (2007): 153–73; Andrei Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 165–76; Andrei Orlov, "The Face as the Heavenly Counterpart of the Visionary in the Slavonic Ladder of Jacob," in *From Apocalypticism to Merkabah Mysticism: Studies in the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 399–419.

3. Jarl E. Fossum, *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology*, *Novum Testamentum et orbis antiquus* vol. 30 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995), 140–41.

4. Christopher Rowland, "John 1.51, Jewish Apocalyptic and Targumic Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 30, no. 4 (1984): 504.

One text that is a little clearer is an account about Moses called *Exagoge*, written by Ezekiel the Tragedian; in this text Moses is taken up into heaven and sees this noble man sitting on the throne. Moses comments, "He beckoned me and I stood before the throne. He handed me the scepter and told me to sit on the great throne and gave me the royal crown and he departed from the throne."⁵ The exact identity of this noble man on the throne is not given; we may assume that it is God himself, but in any regard, Moses is given his place on this divine throne and given a scepter and a crown. So again, we see this conflation of the one who ascends to heaven with the figure on the throne—and their identities are shared in some way.

Barker mentioned the conflation of God and the Lamb, including the idea that there is a divine throne "of God and of the Lamb" (see Rev. 22:3). I thought it was interesting to compare that to Joseph Smith's vision of heaven where he saw the "blazing throne of God, whereon was seated the Father and the Son" (see D&C 137:3; compare 76:21). They both seemed to be seated on the same throne, and so this idea that we can find in these ancient texts is perpetuated in Joseph Smith's vision. Also, in the Pearl of Great Price, in the Book of Moses, Enoch is promised a throne in heaven. So, whether it is the same throne that God is seated on or if it is his own separate throne, the individual is promised a position similar, if still subordinate, to God's.

Another interesting ancient text, known as the *Testament of Abraham*, has some very intriguing ideas. In this text, Abraham ascends to heaven, and he sees a man seated on a glorious, golden throne. Most would assume that this figure would be God himself. Abraham notes the appearance of this man is "like that of the Sovereign Lord himself."⁶ Abraham sees this figure weeping and sorrowing and he asks his angelic guide, "Who is this most wondrous man, who is decked out with so great a glory, and who at one moment weeps and wails, and at the next rejoices and exults?"⁷ And he is told that it is actually Adam, that Adam is enthroned there and he is weeping because he has seen so many of his children on earth making wrong choices and following the wrong path.

5. Howard Jacobson, *The Exagoge of Ezekiel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 55.

6. *Testament of Abraham* 11:5–6, in *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, ed. H. F. D. Sparks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 408.

7. *Testament of Abraham* 11:9–10, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 409.

But we see that from Abraham's initial perspective, this figure looks like the Lord; to him, it is a figure identical with the Lord. On that note of "weeping" in heaven, this imagery also shows up in the Pearl of Great Price where Enoch witnesses God himself weeping because of the sins and suffering of his children—the human race—so, a very similar situation. When Enoch is allowed to see through God's eyes and witness this suffering for himself, he is then also moved to weep just as God did (see Moses 7:28–62). This is a significant aspect of the oneness that exists in the heavenly holy of holies. The individual is often able to see what God sees, know what God knows, and even feel what God feels.⁸

As a side note, I was speaking with my father about these traditions and this idea of the empathy of seeing through God's eyes. My father works a lot with near-death studies, and he commented to me that in many accounts of near-death experiences is this feeling of unity or oneness with the light they behold, or with God himself, or with other individuals. Some have described being able to see through God's eyes or to share briefly in God's knowledge or experience the empathy or love God has for others, or being able to see through the eyes of another individual and feel what they are going through. I thought that was an interesting parallel.

In the *Testament of Abraham*, Abraham then sees another figure on a throne who is in the act of passing judgment. This figure looks just like the previous figure he had seen enthroned (Adam), and he says that this second one was bright as the sun and looked like the Son of God. Abraham is told by his angelic guide that this second enthroned figure is, in fact, Abel, the son of Adam. So, we see these parallels in which Adam looks like God, and Abel looks like Adam and like God (or the Son of God). A type of "oneness" is created where there is this great similarity among all these figures who have ascended to heaven.

I would like to return to my discussion of Enoch, who, in *2 Enoch*, takes on the role or position of the Lord when he was sent to share his sacred writings with mankind. I would point out that this notion is found throughout the Holy Scriptures that we use, although it often goes unnoticed. There are many instances in scripture in which it is unclear if an individual is interacting with God or with a messenger

8. For more on this, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Jacob A. Rennaker, and David J. Larsen, "Revisiting the Forgotten Voices of Weeping in Moses 7: A Comparison with Ancient Texts," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): 41–71.

from God. For example, in Genesis 32, we read of Jacob wrestling with an angel. We assume that it is an angel, but the text says only that "there wrestled a man with him" (v. 24). The odd thing is that after this experience, as the text states, "Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (v. 30). We see in ancient texts, generally, a belief that if one saw the face of God, he or she would perish. So, Jacob wrestles with a "man," but also believes that he has seen God's face.

A similar story in Judges 13 involves Manoah and his wife, the parents of the hero Samson. The couple are visited by, again, a "man," but this man is also specifically called "the angel of the Lord" (v. 13). The text says that the name of the angel was secret, and he would not share it (vv. 17–18). Directly after stating that Manoah "knew that he was an angel of the Lord," the text goes on to say that "Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God" (vv. 21–22).

Another example is that of Joshua the high priest, in Zechariah 3, who stands before the angel of the Lord in the heavenly court. At some points, the text states that the angel is speaking to Joshua, but at other times, it appears that the Lord himself is there speaking. At times, when the angel speaks, he is apparently dictating what the Lord wants said, but at other points it is hard to tell who exactly is talking. The figures of the Lord and the angel of the Lord seem to blend together.⁹ We see something similar happening in the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, where the "angel of the Lord" is heard out of heaven, speaking as if he were the Lord (Gen. 22:11–18).

Latter-day Saints might see these occurrences as examples of the notion of divine investiture of authority. During his ministry, Jesus declared that he came in his Father's name (John 5:43). He was doing and saying exactly what his Father would have done and said. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie noted, "The Father-Elohim has placed his name upon the Son, has given him his own power and authority, and has authorized him to speak in the first person as though he were the original or primal Father."¹⁰

9. The voice of Zechariah himself seems to be intermingled with that of the Lord and the angel as well. See verse 5, where someone speaks in the first person (we may assume that it is Zechariah, who is narrating the chapter), but says what we might expect the angel to say.

10. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 63.

One example of this can be found in *The Pearl of Great Price*, where we have the account of Moses standing before God, face to face. We should likely understand that Moses is speaking with Jehovah, the premortal Jesus Christ. The Lord declares to Moses that he is the Almighty, and that Moses is his son. Interestingly, the premortal Christ declares to Moses: “And I have a work for thee, Moses, my son; and thou art in the similitude of mine Only Begotten; and mine Only Begotten is and shall be the Savior” (Moses 1:6). It might seem odd for Christ to refer to the Only Begotten, the Speaker himself, in the third person, but that is apparently what he does here.

The Lord does this again when he is speaking to Enoch in Moses 7. He is giving Enoch a vision of future events and begins to comment on the mission of the Messiah. Speaking of the promised Savior, the Lord states: “And that which I have chosen hath pled before my face. Wherefore, he suffereth for their sins; inasmuch as they will repent in the day that my Chosen shall return unto me” (Moses 7:39). Again, what we are apparently observing is Jehovah, the premortal Christ, speaking about himself and his messianic mission in the third person. Later in the chapter, when Enoch asks the Lord if, after Christ’s ministry, he will not come upon the earth again, the Lord tells Enoch: “As I live, even so will I come in the last days” (v. 60). So, we have the Lord speaking as if he were God the Father, referring to Christ in the third person, but then also declaring himself to be “the Son of Man” (v. 65) who will come to dwell on the earth in righteousness for a thousand years. This is because of the divine investiture of authority. Christ speaks as if he were the Father, just as the angel of the Lord can speak as if he were the Lord. It is not unlikely that for the mortal figures involved in these scriptural passages, there was, indeed, some confusion over who, exactly, they were seeing or with whom they were speaking.

This phenomenon should be used to guide our understanding of the many similar passages in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon frequently refers to the premortal Jesus Christ as God, the eternal God, or even the Eternal Father.¹¹ For the Nephites, Jehovah, the premortal Christ, was God. There are a number of clear references to God the Father, as distinct from God the Son, in the Book of Mormon, but the Son is clearly the God that they are interacting with most of the time. The roles and titles of God the Father and God the Son overlap significantly.

11. See, for example, 2 Nephi 11:6–7; Mosiah 7:26–28; 1 Nephi 11:13–21, 1830 edition.

We get more insight into the relationship between the Father and Son when Jesus finally comes to visit the Book of Mormon people after his resurrection. Christ speaks frequently of the Father, and how he has been sent by the Father and is doing his will. But he also strongly emphasizes his Oneness with the Father as well. There is a story in 3 Nephi to this regard that is also a very interesting parallel to what Barker was saying about John 17 and the high priestly prayer, or the intercessory prayer; this is when Jesus is with the people in the Book of Mormon and he prays for them. His prayer is very similar to the prayer he gives in John 17, where he asks that the disciples who are with him, and the people who are with him, can become one in the way he is one with the Father. When Jesus asks his chosen disciples to pray, they pray to him, "calling him their Lord and their God" (3 Ne. 19:18). It is hard to tell if they are confused or if they simply recognize the glory of the Deity who is present there with them. When Jesus then begins to pray, he makes the distinction between himself and the Father clearer, but also the nature of their Oneness. He prays:

Father, I thank thee that thou hast given the Holy Ghost unto these whom I have chosen; and it is because of their belief in me that I have chosen them out of the world. Father, thou hast given them the Holy Ghost because they believe in me; and thou seest that they believe in me because thou hearest them, and they pray unto me; and they pray unto me because I am with them. And now Father, I pray unto thee for them, and also for all those who shall believe on their words, that they may believe in me, that I may be in them as thou, Father, art in me, that we may be one. (3 Ne. 19:20–23)

The result of this prayer is that all who are present are transfigured to literally become like Jesus. What is very interesting—and I think this parallels a lot of what Barker was saying, with the temple context of all this—is that when Jesus hears the people pray, he in turn prays to the Father, and then the record says: "And it came to pass that Jesus blessed them as they did pray unto him; and his countenance did smile upon them and the light of his countenance did shine upon them" (3 Ne. 19:25). Now, these are the words of the high-priestly blessing from Numbers 6:24, 26, "The Lord bless thee and keep thee . . . the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee." That's exactly what is happening here, that "the light of his countenance did shine upon them, and behold they were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus; and behold the whiteness thereof did exceed all the whiteness, yea, even there could be nothing upon earth so white as the whiteness thereof" (3 Ne. 19:25). So,

we see in this prayer that Jesus asks for them to be one; they are transfigured, and they look like Jesus. In a very real sense, they are becoming one with him.

I appreciate very much Barker's insights here, today, and I believe that what she is uncovering with all of this temple context, the high-priestly context, has a lot in common with what we find in our LDS scriptures, in the Pearl of Great Price, and in the Book of Mormon. We would benefit greatly from applying some of these concepts that she is sharing with us to our study of our own scriptures.

David J. Larsen received his PhD in biblical studies from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, an MA in biblical theology from Marquette University, and a BA in Near Eastern studies from Brigham Young University. His research interests include Jewish and Christian apocalyptic and mysticism, pseudepigrapha and apocryphal literature, royal/temple themes in the Bible and in the Dead Sea Scrolls, "ascent to heaven" traditions, and intertextuality between the Bible and the Book of Mormon. He has taught Book of Mormon courses as an adjunct professor for both Brigham Young University (Provo) and BYU–Idaho. He works as a research fellow for Book of Mormon Central and is currently conducting comprehensive research on the use of the Psalms in the Book of Mormon.