

Margaret Barker.  
*Temple Themes in Christian Worship.*  
London: T&T Clark International, 2008

Reviewed by Don Norton

The thesis of Margaret Barker's book *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* is simple and straightforward: "Christian worship was modelled on temple worship" (16).

Three prior theses, amply developed by Barker in her earlier books, underlie this thesis. First, the second temple, begun about 535 BCE by the Jews returning from Babylon, was in many ways a false temple. In *Temple Theology*, Barker explains that despite the reforms of Josiah—or perhaps because of "Josiah's purge"—the "impure" second temple lacked the essential artifacts and corresponding worship patterns of Moses' Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple. The theology of Solomon's Temple was preempted by those whom Barker calls "Deuteronomists," whose temple worship and theology were based on the Deuteronomic law and not on the original temple.<sup>1</sup> That is why a number of Jewish groups, questioning the temple worship of the time, fled from Jerusalem.

Second, the early Christians restored the true temple theology. How else, asks John McDade SJ in the foreword to *Temple Theology*, could the early Christian "theology and mysticism of the Jerusalem temple" emerge "so clearly, so rapidly and with such a high degree of definition"?<sup>2</sup>

Third, despite efforts by Jewish and Christian editors and canonizers to suppress temple theology, references and allusions related to the myths and rituals of the "old theology," as Barker labels it, can still be identified in the "coded" language of both the Old and New Testaments—if one knows what to look for. For example, the Psalms are temple hymns; the writings of Enoch (held in high esteem by the Qumran community and early Christians) are explicit in temple theology;<sup>3</sup> parts of the Qumran and the

Nag Hammadi libraries are full of allusions to temple theology; and the Book of Revelation is essentially a temple text.

Although we are told in Acts 2:46 that the early Christians continued “daily with one accord in the temple,” the details of those activities are nowhere made explicit in the gospels or other New Testament writings. There is much evidence, however, especially in the writings of John and Paul, that there existed among the early Christians a public and a private doctrine and pattern of worship, the latter centered in the temple.<sup>4</sup>

The key phrase, and the main point of Barker’s many books, is thus *knowing what to look for*. The newly discovered Jewish Qumran texts (1947+) as well as the Nag Hammadi Christian Library (1945) have led to a major reassessment of both traditional Judaism and early Christianity, and they point to a need to revise the meaning and significance of previously known texts. The blandness of many modern translations of the Bible has also been a serious hindrance to accessing authentic Bible imagery: “A diluted ‘instant’ Christianity has been offered as junk food for the mass market,”<sup>5</sup> and worship practices in most Christian religions have over time been allegorized and reinterpreted. Though we have nowhere an explicit description of what was actually done in the temples, we do know the context and significance of temple theology, which centers on the theme “the Lord in the midst” (3), a theme that recurs in the Old Testament and also in the New. In fact, Barker objects to the term *new* in reference to the New Testament corpus; what happened in the early Christian church was but an extension of the authentic ancient *eternal* or *everlasting covenant* (phrases Barker uses often in her writings), “set in the holy of holies” (3).

Barker draws extensively from biblical apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, writings that were held in high esteem by devout groups of Jews and Christians. These writings often give hints, even make explicit reference, to the true temple tradition. The writings of early Christian church fathers and Christian clergy of the first five centuries CE are also useful, as well as theology and practices preserved to an extent even today in the Eastern Christian churches. A twelve-page annotated bibliography lists these sources that Barker cites.

The book consists of elaborately developed references and assertions, for example, that early Christian worship was not an extension of the synagogue, but the temple. The themes of the Last Supper “seem more akin to the Day of Atonement than to Passover” (23), the blood implying more a temple setting than the Passover, despite the Passover imagery and the date of the rite. In the chapter “Sons and Heirs,” Barker takes up the huge debate over the meaning of the phrase “Son of Man,”

suggesting that among the visionaries, the word *man* referred to angels, and the word *animal* to humans outside the covenant. Since the Man was the Great Angel and the Messiah, the title *man* makes much more sense as it is used in the scriptures. Covenant Christians thus became *angels*, and angels figure prominently in all early Christian worship and hence in Barker's writings.

Other chapters discuss rites and imagery closely associated with atonement, special clothing, anointing ("a clear sign of restoring the ancient royal priesthood" [126]), washing and baptism, resurrection, the eternal covenant, what it means to become a *son*, and the wearing of the name of Christ. According to Barker, the original Christ symbol was an **X** (the Hebrew letter *tau*, which was written as a diagonal cross in the sixth century BC), the baptismal cross, which later was reinterpreted as a vertical cross, the sign of the Crucifixion adopted by Christian communities (100).

Barker resumes in this volume several themes she has developed over the last two decades. Jewish monotheism was a later development among the Jews, perhaps as a reaction to Christianity. Yahweh (Jehovah) of the Old Testament is Christ of the New Testament, the son of El, the Most High God, and he was present at the creation. A female figure, the ubiquitous Wisdom, complements the godhead, though "how wisdom related to the Holy Spirit is not clear" (127). The identity and role of Wisdom are discussed in chapters and other sections in this latest work, as well as full chapters in earlier Barker volumes.

Hymns were a central part of early Christian worship (as they were in the temple). We learn in the Qumran texts that "worshippers committed themselves to stay within the covenant and keep the 'engraved precept' on their tongues" (227). Similarly, "Christian writers compared the music of their worship to the harmony of the angels" (235).

Barker discusses the sense of profound loss Christians felt at the destruction of the Second Temple as well as attempts over the centuries to restore the original temple, despite the disappearance of many of the most sacred of the artifacts of Solomon's Temple, which were absent even in the Second Temple.

Barker has certainly not been without her critics: "I have often been reminded how far I have travelled (or even strayed!) from the mainstream," she acknowledges.<sup>6</sup> Barker's meticulous explorations of temple theology over the last two decades (included in ten books and numerous articles) certainly warrant careful scrutiny. Her conclusions are not to be easily dismissed, however new or different they may seem at a cursory glance. Barker

is careful to note throughout her writings when her conclusions are complex or tentative. Clearly, something central to Jewish and Christian worship was lost with the loss of the temple, and a reconstruction of early Christian worship, such as Barker offers, thus becomes entirely appropriate.

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1. Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2004), 5–7.
2. Barker, *Temple Theology*, vii.
3. Margaret Barker, *The Lost Prophet: The Book of Enoch and Its Influence on Christianity*, 1988 and recently reprinted.
4. See Barker’s conveniently available article “The Secret Tradition,” 1993, at [www.margaretbarker.com](http://www.margaretbarker.com), listed under “Papers.”
5. Margaret Barker, *On Earth As It Is in Heaven: Temple Symbolism in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 2.
6. Barker, *Temple Theology*, 1.