

**THE LADY AND HER TEMPLE: AN ORTHODOX APPRAISAL OF THE
TEMPLE THEOLOGY OF MARGARET BARKER
A Brief Summary**

This document briefly summarizes my larger essay, “The Lady and Her Temple: An Orthodox Appraisal of the Temple Theology of Margaret Barker”. It does so by first giving a brief overview of her historical reconstruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, then by analyzing her methodology in reconstructing her Temple Theology, and finally examines a few of the theological conclusions that Barker proposes. In the end, it is concluded that Barker’s work is irreconcilable with Orthodox theology or theological interpretation of Scripture. In an effort to be concise, this summary only gives a brief overview of the points touched on in the fuller essay. Those seeking a detailed analysis of Ms. Barker’s work, along with a more thorough refutation of the same and complete documentation of the claims made throughout this summary are referred to that longer document.

Who is Margaret Barker? Why should the Orthodox be concerned with her work?

Margaret Barker is a biblical scholar and lay Methodist preacher from England who is best known for her project known as “Temple Theology”. Over the past decade or so her approach to Scripture has attracted the attention of a number of Orthodox hierarchs and intellectuals and her teachings have been featured on more popular Orthodox platforms. This uncritical reception and platforming of her work has led to the deception of those who are unable to see the problems with her teachings and has scandalized members of the faithful who cannot understand how their clergy or hierarchs could accept her ideas.

What is “Temple Theology”?

Margaret Barker offers a brief description of her overall theological project on her author website, www.margaretbarker.com, which is cited in full here:

Temple theology traces the roots of Christian theology back into the first Temple, destroyed by the cultural revolution in the time of King Josiah at the end of the seventh century BCE. Refugees from the purges settled in Egypt and Arabia. From widely scattered surviving fragments, it is possible to reconstruct the world view of the first Christians, and to restore to their original setting such key concepts as the Messiah, divine Sonship, covenant, atonement, resurrection, incarnation, the Second Coming and the Kingdom of God.¹

Because of this, she claims that a proper approach to the ancient Jerusalem Temple will uncover the roots of number of Christian doctrines and institutions, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, priesthood and liturgy, mystical vision and theosis, even the cult of the Virgin Mother of God.

How does Margaret Barker’s “Temple Theology” compare to what we find in Scripture?

Central to Margaret Barker’s view of the temple, as noted in the summary listed above, is her vilification of the righteous King Josiah who reigned in the city of Jerusalem ca. 640-609 BC. According to the biblical accounts in IV Kingdoms (II Kings) 22-23 and II Chronicles 34-36, King

¹ This description can be found here: <http://www.margaretbarker.com/Temple/default.htm>.

Josiah was a model king, who followed the will of the Lord and who sought to restore the purity of Israel's faith and practice in accordance with Law of Moses by destroying idols and abolishing perverse pagan practices that had been introduced into the Temple by his less faithful predecessors. In the eyes of Margaret Barker, though, King Josiah was, first, the perpetrator of a cultural and religious revolution that destroyed the earlier, normative Temple practices and theology and then, secondly, the architect of a massive ideological propaganda program which fabricated books that they claimed Moses had written as well as re-written versions of Israel's history up to their time to try to justify their theology and program. In her view, then, such practices as the worship of the Canaanite goddess Asherah, the worship of various angels, rites of initiation into esoteric wisdom and visionary experiences, even child sacrifice, were all normative aspects of the original Temple before Josiah's time and, though they were suppressed for centuries thereafter, she would have us understand Christianity as a restoration of those first Temple practices (e.g. the veneration of the Theotokos is a retrieval of the ancient worship of the mother goddess). Given that she proposes such a different portrayal of the reign of King Josiah and the nature of the Jerusalem Temple, we are left to ask who we will trust: the God-inspired, prophetic author of the canonical scriptures or Margaret Barker.²

How does Margaret Barker “reconstruct” her Temple Theology if Josiah stamped it out?

Given Ms. Barker's claims about the extent of King Josiah's reforms and his efforts to cover his tracks, we might wonder how, even if her claims were true, we would ever be able to recover any evidence of this supposedly older Temple Theology, but Barker claims that King Josiah was not able to completely blot out the “older religion”. Barker proposes a number of methods for “retrieving” her Temple Theology:

- *Reverse Inferences based on Deuteronomy*: Barker believes that the Book of Deuteronomy was not written by Moses, but was actually composed by King Josiah's accomplices, she argues we can assume that practices forbidden in Deuteronomy (e.g. divination, child sacrifice, worship of a goddess) were actually a normal part of Israel's earlier worship and theology.
- *Allegorical Reading of Canonical Scriptures*: Barker claims to be able to decode certain Old Testament stories, for example the accounts of the creation of the world in Genesis 1 and of Adam and Eve in Eden in Genesis 2-3, to reveal that they were never meant to be taken as accounts of real event but were actually just symbolic reminiscences of the Temple before Josiah's time.
- *Altering the Wording of the Hebrew Text*: Barker claims that Hebrew scribes altered the text of Scripture to erase her imaginary Temple from its pages and proposes reworking the spelling of certain words in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament to uncover what she believes they originally said (e.g. by changing some letters in the word for “oak tree” in Joshua 24:26 claims the passage referred to a “goddess” and, further, the divine name El

² For a concise presentation of Margaret Barker's views on this matter, her lecture “What Did Josiah Reform?” delivered at Brigham Young University is available in print and video formats. The text of the lecture is available here (<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?filename=18&article=1038&context=mi&type=additional>) and the video is available here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtFsFdINbN8>).

Shaddai, regularly understood to mean “God Almighty” actually refers to a deity with breasts who nourishes her people).

- *Preferring Extra-Canoinal Literature over Scripture:* Barker believes the canonical Scriptures are the products of those who sought to erase her Temple theology from its pages and, so, she regularly resorts to books that were never accepted by the Church as Scripture, regularly praising the pseudopigraphical Books of Enoch and proposing that the Gnostic Gospel of Philip better understood Christ than the canonical Gospels and the Apostle Paul, even making regular reference later Jewish and Islamic traditions.

Given all of this, why would any Orthodox be interested in her work in the first place?

While at first glance, Margaret Barker’s work seems to shore up a number of Orthodox dogmatic claims (e.g. dogmas concerning the Trinity and Incarnation and the veneration of the Theotokos) by finding ancient Israelite Temple precedents for these and seems to invoke a number of key terms in Orthodox thinking (e.g. tradition, theosis, liturgy and resurrection), on closer examination it becomes clear that Margaret Barker means something very different by these terms than is taught in the Orthodox Church. A few examples are considered:

- *Doctrine of the Trinity:* Barker claims, in her 1992 book *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God*, that ancient Israel distinguished between God (El or Elohim) and the Lord (Yahweh) and that the restoration of this view in opposition to a more narrow monotheism introduced by Josiah this was the basis of the early Christian claims about the divinity of Christ. But, in her reconstruction of the relevant Old Testament passages, the Lord (Yahweh) is only one of many “sons of El/Elohim”, even if he is to be considered the chief among this group. Her portrayal, then, does not provide evidence for an only-begotten Son, co-eternal with the Father, but rather recasts the relationship between the Father and the Son in the mold of the Canaanite pantheon where the creator deity, El, has appointed one of his divine sons, the storm-god Baal, as the head of a council consisting of the rest of his divine offspring.
- *Doctrine of the Incarnation:* Barker claims, in her 1996 book *The Risen Lord*, to challenge the consensus of skeptical scholars who reject the idea that Jesus or his first followers could have understood Him to be divine but that this was only a later development in Christian thinking. While such a challenge would certainly be welcome if it defended the traditional portrayal of Christ in the Gospels and Church tradition, what Barker actually argues, on the basis of the Gnostic Gospel of Philip, that the “resurrection of Christ” did not refer to something that happened to Him after His crucifixion, but instead describes a visionary experience he underwent at the time of His baptism in the Jordan wherein He was granted heavenly wisdom and came to understand His divine mission. Presumably it was at this time that Jesus either was granted his divine status or, at the least, only then became aware of it. This adoptionist portrayal of Christ is a far cry from Orthodox Christology and her use of Gnostic texts in order to reinterpret canonical Scriptures and patristic writings is in no way in keeping with the norms of Orthodox scriptural interpretation.
- *Veneration of the Theotokos:* Barker claims, in her 2012 book *The Mother of the Lord – Volume One: The Lady in the Temple*, that the Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, was a restoration of an older Temple belief in and worship of the goddess Asherah, the Mother of the Lord. Briefly put, she does this by equating the Asherah

removed from the Temple by Josiah with the personified figure of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs and then claiming to have found numerous places throughout Scripture that once referred to a goddess whose identity had been erased by later scribes. Once again, while she might seem to promise an Old Testament precedent and justification of the Christian veneration of the Theotokos, what she actually delivers is a subtle attempt to smuggle in an ancient paganism unrecognizable to any believing Orthodox Christian.

While numerous other subjects could be examined, these examples should suffice to demonstrate that Margaret Barker's Temple Theology is not as harmonious with Orthodox theology as some may have us believe. Instead, her thinking is probably far more compatible with the theology of Mormon sectarians who have exhibited a great deal of excitement about her teachings, a fact that should give any Orthodox Christian considering her work great cause for concern.

Conclusion

Margaret Barker's work, with its focus on Temple theology and ritual, might interest many Orthodox scholars who, rightfully, lament the absence of such themes in the bulk of modern Old Testament scholarship and, on the basis of a superficial reading, might seem to dovetail with certain aspects of Orthodox theology and tradition. On closer examination, however, her work is revealed to be nothing more than a latter-day manifestation of "knowledge falsely so-called" which, left unchecked, will only confuse and deceive the faithful. As such, her writings should in no wise be endorsed by Orthodox hierarchs, clergy and faithful, nor should she be given platforms in Orthodox settings to teach her erroneous ideas.