



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title A Latter-day Saint Reception of Temple Themes in Christian Worship

Author(s) John W. Welch

Reference *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 3-7.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Welch endorses Barker's work on temple studies, particularly in her book *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*.

A LATTER-DAY SAINT RECEPTION OF *TEMPLE THEMES IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP*

John W. Welch

I am grateful for the privilege of meeting and addressing all of you. I have eagerly anticipated this day, and I hope it will be everything that everyone has desired of it. Thanks to all who have made this important occasion possible. As Margaret once said to me at the conclusion of a different event, I sense that we will look back on this occasion as a turning point in Christian temple studies.

As one of the organizers of a new section on temple studies for the Society of Biblical Literature, I am happy to give an enthusiastic response and warm reception to Margaret's book. I hope we will soon see a session at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature dedicated to the topic of temple themes in Christian worship, with this book as its centerpiece.

I am optimistic that Margaret's insights will become widely acceptable, precisely because they make such good sense of the world that Jesus knew and thereby breathe life into our worship of him. Jesus's world was a world in which temples were pervasive, dominant, identity-forming, and community-shaping institutions. We haven't understood well enough that temples were of the essence in all ancient religions, but a recent burst of books about temple studies shows that people are finally seeing this more clearly. For this I am grateful.

Certainly Peter spoke of the church as a nation of priests, and early Christians saw themselves in terms of that temple-centric world and

even envied the temple. Margaret builds on solid ground in highlighting the Liturgy of James, in which “all Christians gave thanks that they could enter the holy of holies, ‘being counted worthy to enter . . . within the veil’” and cast themselves before God’s goodness (p. 226).

I also am confident that Margaret’s approach will continue to yield abundant future harvests of new ideas in the hands of further researchers, precisely because her approach shines multiple lights on the teachings of Jesus and what it originally meant to be a Christian. Her evidence is not always as bright in these obscure corners of history as we would like, but as is the case when one looks at an impressionist painting, the details close up may not always be sharply defined; yet as Margaret herself describes her own depiction, somehow “the overall picture is clear” (p. 131) and, I would add, likewise beautiful and satisfying.

Margaret’s evidence is admittedly eclectic, and she makes considerable use of etymologies, which are always intriguingly debatable; but the cumulative evidence that she presents—and I emphasize *cumulative*—is impressive and weighty. Even if people discount some of her evidence or resist some of her assumptions, no one can doubt that Margaret is asking the right questions. And as a German proverb rightly says, *Gute Frage ist halbe Antwort* (A good question is half the answer).

In dealing with “coded” or symbolic writings as we encounter them in the Bible and other early Christian texts, it is crucial, as Margaret says, to know what to look for. As several philosophers have emphasized, cognition is in large part recognition.

My only criticism, if it be one, is that this work needs to be extended even further from where this book leaves off. In historical Jesus studies, more attention now needs to be given to Jesus and the temple, for it dominated every landscape in Jerusalem in Jesus’s day. Whenever we see Jesus in Jerusalem, we see him in or in the vicinity of the temple. Too rarely have we noticed how many of his teachings, conversations, and actions are reported in a temple setting. By my count, some 12 percent of the words in all four Gospels are set in the

temple or its confines. After Margaret's work, everything in the New Testament needs to be reconsidered in terms of temple themes.

For example, Margaret rightly points to several temple connections in the Sermon on the Mount, mainly in the beatitude that promises that the "pure in heart" will "see God" (pp. 18, 146) and also in the Lord's Prayer (p. 20), which speaks of seeing the kingdom come and of the "daily bread" as an allusion to the bread of the Presence (p. 208). But as my own current work strives to show, pervasive temple connections can be drawn (as Margaret is well aware) throughout the entire Sermon on the Mount. For example, her intriguing discussion of how all Christians (as priests) bear (or forgive) [*nasa'*] the sins of others by consuming the inward parts of the sacrifice (pp. 193, 198–99) stands ready and waiting to be connected with "forgive us our debts, as we forgive [or bear!] the transgressions of others" (Matthew 6:12, my translation).

I'm also drawn to the idea that all Christians are not only priests but high priests. Margaret's insight explains the puzzling fact that the word *firstborn* in Hebrews 12:23 is a plural, for all shall be called not just "sons of God" but "firstborn sons of God," it being a mystery how there can be more than one "firstborn."

Beyond this, I would welcome from Margaret a broader definition of the term *worship*. There is no need to limit the domain of Christian worship to the three areas of worship—baptism, Eucharist, and singing—that are covered in this book. The word for "worship" in the New Testament, *latreuo*, also includes within its many meanings prayer, keeping the commandments, missionary work, healing, and confession, and it comprises the whole of Christian existence. And all of this has temple connections. Similarly, more can be said about temple connections with kingship and prophecy, in addition to the priesthood. Jesus was not only priest but also prophet and king. So this field is white and ready to harvest.

Finally, I would like to add a brief word of response coming from my Mormon perspective. As a Latter-day Saint, I have a deep love for and interest in the temple, a place that Jesus loved, wept over, and revered as his Father's house. Striving to be saints, or holy ones,

Latter-day Saints have built temples in many countries around the world. They offer working examples of Christian temples in operation. Their practices tap into much of the earliest temple strata of Christianity.

In LDS temples, the faithful are given a new name and a white robe, are washed and anointed, and are instructed through a ritual drama of God the Father's plan of salvation. Prayers are offered for the healing of the sick and the afflicted.

Regarding baptism, you might be interested to know that LDS baptisms of males over twelve years of age are followed immediately by an ordination to the office of priest in the Aaronic Priesthood. LDS men, myself included, are later ordained high priests in the Melchizedek Priesthood.

For many reasons such as these, Latter-day Saints will find themselves instinctively drawn to many of Margaret's themes, sources, and insights found in each chapter of this engaging book.

In conclusion, I devoutly hope that Margaret's work will inspire Christians everywhere. Her writings enrich ordinary sacraments with extraordinary sources. Worship strives to tap into deep reservoirs of spiritual power. By reconnecting the ordinary Christian's worship with its sustaining temple roots, Margaret takes biblical studies out of the sterile confines of arcane academic arenas (where biblical studies usually languish) and reveals what difference these purposefully obscure, guardedly veiled, and now long-forgotten mysteries can make today in breathing new life into the minds and hearts of faithful sons and daughters of God.

Imagine actually enriching every Christian's baptismal experience with the twelve powerful steps of initiation found in the *Testament of Levi*, reflecting temple traditions older than the Temple of Herod. Or imagine explicitly enriching the Eucharist with verdant themes of triumph, healing, fasting, charity, enthronement, thanksgiving, consecration, joy, covenant sacrifice, and cosmic renewal and reconciliation (pp. 190, 197). Imagine enriching hymnody with a theology of unity and harmony among all the people on earth.

I was quite struck by Margaret's quote of Psalm 73:16–17 (p. 192). Those words apply to pondering all religious issues. The Psalmist said, “It seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary [temple] of God; then I perceived their end.”

While Margaret is appropriately cautious about such matters (p. 105), it is abundantly clear that some things that were perfectly plain and precious in early Christianity have gone missing. The only question is how much of that lost tradition can now be detected, recovered, and restored. If finding these lost pearls of great price is the knack of the true detective, Margaret Barker can rightly be called the Sherlock Holmes of biblical studies. Fortunately the “mystery” in her case is not the search for a grisly killer but for that which gives eternal life.

So, Margaret has my sustained applause. I congratulate her on her many years of fruitful research, and I enthusiastically hope for an encore!

