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Abstract Review of *Christmas: The Original Story* (2008), by Margaret Barker.

Christmas Stories

John W. Welch

Review of Margaret Barker. *Christmas: The Original Story*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008. xiv + 191 pp. £12.99, $19.95.

Every Christmas, I enjoy hearing again and learning more about the scriptures, the sagas, the artworks and music, the traditions and customs, and the stories associated with the birth of the Savior. There is so much more to this pivotal event in world history than most people realize. And the strong tendency in our commercial world is to trivialize the whole celebration into something far less than it has been in previous generations, let alone what it originally was. One anchor in any scriptural library about Christmas is Raymond E. Brown's marvelous book *The Birth of the Messiah*, which exhaustively sifts and organizes hundreds of years of mainstream commentary on the birth narratives told by Matthew and Luke. With the publication of Margaret Barker's eye-opening paperback, we now can see, as we have suspected all along, that there is much more to the Christmas story than we have known before. Coming from older traditions and from long-forgotten corners of early Christian and Jewish sources, new perspectives now open up new vistas of thematic and doctrinal significance on that midnight clear. I am very happy to add Barker's book to my permanent list of Christmas must-rereads.

Latter-day Saint Connectivity

All Latter-day Saints know full well that there is more to the Christmas story than the few bits and pieces told by Matthew and Luke. Indeed, as Barker develops throughout this reader-friendly book, there were two births of Jesus. In December, the world celebrates his nativity according to the flesh, but there was also a previous, eternal birth in the spirit (p. xii). Matthew and Luke tell about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, his incarnation in the flesh; Mark and John begin their gospels at earlier points of departure. Mark begins, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . ." (Mark 1:1), taking the reader directly to the prophetic announcement from the mouth of Malachi, "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee" (Mark 1:2, quoting Malachi 3:1). Malachi knew of a plan laid down long before any decree went out from Caesar Augustus. John takes his readers all the way back into the primordial council in heaven before the foundations of the world, where "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was [a] God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him" (John 1:1–3). Here is another generation of the Son of God. Yet, in this world of monistic, static theological excesses, who shall proclaim this other generation? Barker is more than willing to step forward to do so.

For Barker it is of the essence that the eternal Creator came into this world, to use the language of the temple, "through the veil from the presence of God into the material world," and "the only person who did this was, by definition, the high priest" (p. 32). The holy physical birth of the Great High Priest was prefigured, conceptualized, and made comprehensible, in symbolic part, in the holy realms of the earliest temple traditions, which always strived to connect things in heaven and things on earth.

But more than that, the sacred tradition also reaches back into a primeval childhood in the spiritual realm. Speaking of the New Testament book of Revelation, Barker observes: "John's vision implies that Jesus had a heavenly Mother as well as a heavenly Father" (p. 40). Who this heavenly Mother might have been is unknown, but Barker

suggests that she was known anciently by other names and travails. Barker associates the "Holy Spirit" in Luke 1:35 with the ancient image of "a Queen with crown of stars" and thus sees her, in some sense, as "the Mother of the Messiah" (p. 41). In Micah 5:2–4, Barker finds a trace of an ancient tradition that the divine Mother would give—or had given?—birth to a great Shepherd of Israel.

However blurred such traces may be in the biblical record, Latter-day Saints know about these two births, even in an expanded way, from other revealed sources. That knowledge interacts vividly and resonates harmoniously on several (even if not on all) wavelengths with the Christmas carols hummed by Margaret Barker throughout this book. For Latter-day Saints, there was a premortal spiritual birth not only of Jesus but of all of us, who are also God's children. There was a physical birth not only of him but also of us all. There needed to be a baptismal rebirth not only for him but also for all. He was and is the Great High Priest, but there were and are and forever will be many high priests. In every way, he led the way, and as Barker's book begins to show, the Christmas story is the story of all these ways.

Much happened to and for all of us, and especially to and by Jesus, before the incarnation. Thus the "original story" of which Barker speaks is also "a story of origins." On Christmas, one cannot afford to forget that Jesus was prepared from the foundation of the world, first-born in the spirit, foreordained, promised, and prophesied. As Barker shows in her first two chapters ("The Setting" and "Other Voices"), which set the stage for her greatest Christmas pageant ever, the birth of Jesus in the flesh was not an accident or a mere happening in the history of the world. It was an integral step in a plan of progression laid down and anticipated long before.

Latter-day Saints know, of course, from the Book of Mormon (as well as from biblical passages such as 1 Peter 1:20) that Jesus was "foreordained before the foundation of the world"; that all the prophets have known of and spoken of the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; that he was the Jehovah of the Old Testament, as Barker strongly agrees ("When the first Christians told the story of the birth of Jesus, they were describing how Yahweh [Jehovah] the Lord, the Son of God

Most High, became incarnate," p. 22); and that prophets have long known even some of the specifics of the manner and time of his atoning suffering (1 Peter 1:10–12). Barker points out very well that much confusion has resulted in Christianity "by failing to realize that the early Christians proclaimed Jesus as Yahweh" (p. 58). Thus, for Barker and also for Latter-day Saints, the story of Jesus's birth began long before Gabriel's annunciation to Mary. Equipped with their heightened awareness of these points, all Latter-day Saint readers should be able to discern many enjoyable and enlightening insights in the Yuletide feast that Barker offers her guests.

In particular, Latter-day Saint readers, who have the added perspective of the Christmas story found at the end of Helaman and in the beginning of 3 Nephi 1 in the Book of Mormon, should welcome the possibility of additional insights into the preparations for the coming of Jesus that Barker extracts from a number of extracanonical sources. In her view, many plain and precious things were lost as the Bible was being assembled, and other things were changed or added, perhaps even wrongly. As is always advised when reading the sources, one aided by the Holy Ghost may be able to discern in these texts the right from the wrong.

Temple Themes and Temple Readings

Barker uses two main quarries of building blocks in reconstructing the original Christmas story (or stories). As most New Testament commentators also do, Barker weaves into her analysis a rich array of threads—drawn from evidences about cultural backgrounds, political contexts, and biblical prophecies—as she gives form and sense to the segmented elements contained in the traditional Christmas accounts. But in addition, as she does in all of her signature works, Barker adds information from two distinctive spheres:

1. Temple themes: She points out words and phrases that appear in the New Testament's Christmas stories that call up temple concepts and practices. For example, supporting roles in these stories are identified for temple personnel and sacred rituals, including

- angelic hosts (p. 2),
- coming through the veil to be tabernacled in the flesh (p. 32),
- swaddling clothes (pp. 75–76) and garments of skin and light (pp. 35–36),
- being anointed with the myrrh oil (p. 35),
- the secret rituals of the holy of holies and its glory that "leads into a complex web of associations that join together the high priesthood and the temple, Adam and Eve and the lost garden of Eden, and the birth of Jesus" (p. 35),
- the descent of the high priest out of the holy of holies to be seen by mortals (pp. 44–49).

More important, however, than any single temple element is the overall temple register of the sublime narrative that these stories are trying to relate to their various audiences. The common factor in the rhetorical voice of all these stories is that of supernal holiness. The good news of the most sacred birth of the Messiah, the Prophet, the Priest, and the King is communicated most effectively by setting the Christmas story in the context of the temple, the holiest place known in all the world.

2. Temple Readings: Margaret Barker also advances new interpretations and translations of words and phrases that early Christians drew into their stories of Christmas. Although these words are standard parts of the familiar vocabulary of Christmas readings, they carry with them meanings that come from an older stratum of religious history, always yielding interesting insights. Barker finds in these words evidence that the Christmas story originally was understood, at least by some people, in terms of a hidden and partially lost tradition. For example,

- Eusebius knew some Christians who read the word *mrḥm*, "from the womb," as *mrym*, "from Mary" (p. 6).
- Isaiah 7:14 spoke of "*the* virgin," not "*a* virgin," in both the Hebrew and Greek (p. 42).
- The "Spirit of God" is associated with the "Spirit of Holiness" (p. 7).

- The idea of the "only son" is better conveyed with the words "dearly beloved" (p. 9).
- In Hebrew, *qdsh* can mean both "harlot" and "the holy one" (p. 29), perhaps accounting for the insults leveled against Mary and Jesus regarding his lack of normal paternity.
- In Isaiah 52:14, *mshchty* offers a play on words between *disfigured* and *anointed* (p. 29).
- The "poor" who are to be blessed by the Savior of the world are outcasts from the temple, which is thus to be restored by the Messiah, as it had been known during the First Temple period (p. 56).
- "The Lamb is wordplay for the Servant," namely, the high priestly servant of God in approaching the throne and taking the scroll (p. 61).
- The phrase "Son of God" is now known not to be anachronistic in the Gospels in light of Dead Sea Scroll 4Q246 (p. 62).
- "When God begets the Messiah, he shall come with them [at] the head of the whole congregation of Israel," according to 1Q28aII (p. 62).
- In the older text of Deuteronomy 32:43, "angels of God" was "sons of God," and the Lord was one of the "sons of God" (p. 62).
- The Septuagint Greek version of Habakkuk 3:2 makes reference in the phrase "between the creatures" not to being between the ox and the ass, but between the two cherubim (p. 64).
- *Face* and *prepare* sound almost the same in Hebrew (p. 73), connecting John's preparing the way and the Lord's face shining upon the people.
- "Firstborn is the title for the human person who has become the presence of the Lord on earth" (p. 75).
- The Hebrew word *'ebus*, "manger," resembles *y^{e}bus*, "Jerusalem" (p. 76).
- Other wordplay is found between the Hebrew words for ox and prince, owner and begetter, ass and priest (p. 76).

- In Isaiah 52:7–10, the Hebrew reads, "The Lord has bared his holy arm," but the Septuagint Greek reads, "The Lord will reveal his Holy One" (p. 88).

And so on. The book's indexes are very useful in locating scriptures and subjects that might strike a particular reader's fancy. To get a good feel for the main ideas in this book, I recommend reading its indexes first.

So how do these things deepen understanding of the story or stories of Christmas? Although we have been given different tellings of this story by Matthew, Luke, and others, it is the temple background that ties them all together for Margaret Barker.

Luke's Stories

In chapter 3, Barker turns to Luke's Christmas stories. For Luke, the dominant message of his entire gospel is the universality of salvation through Jesus Christ. He came as the Savior of the entire world, whether one reads Luke 2:14 as announcing "peace on earth, good will to all men" or "peace to all men of good will" (as it reads on some early Greek manuscripts). In Luke's Gospel, Barker sees vestiges and vestments of two birth stories, and both have a strong universalist component.

Barker posits an early date for the writing of the Gospel of Luke, and she classifies Luke as a Jew (pp. 52–53). She believes that this Gospel originally began with the baptism of Jesus (as did and does the Gospel of Mark) and the words of the Father, "this day I have begotten you" (Luke 3:22, quoting Psalm 2:7; Barker uses the RSV), which is not the way this verse reads in the current New Testament, namely, "in thee I am well pleased." Barker argues that baptism is an important form of birth, or rebirth, not unlike the change in status that came to the Levites, who began their temple service at age thirty, the age (not coincidentally) at which Jesus was baptized (Luke 3:23; see Numbers 4:3) (p. 51). This birth or rebirth was seen as a type of resurrection in the context of the holy of holies (p. 51). This information may account for the fact that special mention is made of Nazareth in the Gospel of Luke, for it can be associated with the Hebrew word *nazir*, "meaning

a consecrated person, someone anointed with holy oil," and "referring to the high priest" (p. 127). But for Luke, such a rebirth is not for the high priest or for the Levites alone. This birth through baptism opens the way for all humans to become holy sons of God. Here we see humans becoming divine.

After having begun his Gospel this way, Luke soon added the story of Christ's physical birth. Here we see a divine being becoming human. Themes of universal acclamation and recognition are found in the angelic announcement to the lowly shepherds. Jesus came even to very ordinary people, and he was recognized by them. In Luke, the people of God are seen coming to his house, being welcomed back home by the unfailing hospitality of their divine Father.

There can be no question about the presence of temple elements in Luke 1–2. Main themes throughout the story are couched in the words of the psalms, the hymns of the temple (p. 53). The story begins with Zacharias's priesthood duty, serving in the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement, offering up prayers and incense, when the angel Gabriel appears to him in that chamber of silence to tell him of the birth of his son John, connected with a priestly blessing (pp. 53–54, 70–72). Luke goes on to record ten songs, five by human beings, five by divine beings (p. 55), including a recognition hymn (p. 66) and a "liturgical acclamation" (p. 67), which accounts for similarities in Luke's account to Hannah's song, which was also related to the temple and to her son Samuel being dedicated to serve there (p. 68). Sonship is found in Jesus being called the Son of the highest (p. 60) who will inherit the throne of David" (p. 91).

For Luke there is also no mistaking the point that Jesus was both human and divine. His birth narrative features two powers, justice and mercy; two names, *Yahweh* and *Elohim*; and a double recognition, "my Lord and my God." Barker argues that such things were "represented by the two cherubim over the ark in the holy of holies" (p. 63). The list carries on. The shining of light and the face lifted up hark back to the Messianic star rising (p. 73). "The clothing of the 'newly born' high priest was an important part of his becoming the Son" in the Enoch literature (p. 75–76). Even the inhospitable "inn," or *kataluma*,

"seems also to allude to the holy of holies" (p. 77), for *ta'alumah* in Hebrew refers to the hidden or secret place (p. 78).

But Jesus was not just an ordinary pilgrim to the Temple of Herod. True, Luke goes out of his way to say that Jesus was presented at the temple, but he does not say that Jesus was redeemed for the old requirement of five shekels (p. 82). Instead, Jesus brings a new revelation, a new restoration. Simeon prophesies to Mary that the child would bring division (p. 91), and at the age of twelve, Jesus amazed the temple priests with his understanding in and of the temple (pp. 91–92). Somehow Jesus knew or had learned things that were just not usually explained or discussed. Barker invites readers to see Jesus as a child of the eternal Lady, pure and undefiled Wisdom (*Sophia*).

Matthew's Story

Matthew's birth narrative is different from Luke's, but it is no less saturated with temple themes, as the reader learns in chapter 4. Temple themes are especially at home, of course, in the Jewish worlds of prophecy, priesthood, and kingship, perhaps even having once had clearer roots in the "Hebrew Gospel in the library at Caesarea," which Jerome thought "was the original Matthew" (p. 94) but which has long since been hidden, lost, or suppressed.

Revelation was a key product of the temple in ancient Israel, and revelation dominates Matthew's Christmas story, whether in the form of long-standing prophecies or spur-of-the-moment dreams (p. 95). Barker reflects on Matthew's reporting the precise fulfillments of several prophecies, but hastens to add that this need not mean that he conveniently invented these accounts to conjure up a series of proof texts: "He was telling a story that was both symbolic and cosmological, and so the two narratives were fused" (p. 93). Much was foreknown. Thus the star (not mentioned in Luke) figures significantly in Matthew because Daniel's 490-year prophecy came to an end in 7 BC (p. 110). Everyone was counting and watching stars, for the Great Angel was to appear, "bearing the seal of the living God," to mark the faithful with the Name which was "represented by a diagonal cross" (p. 111). In addition, the star prophecy in Numbers 24, was even more

explicitly prophetic than the Hebrew when read in the Old Greek version: "A star will arise from Jacob and a man shall rise up from Israel" (v. 17). Barker suggests that the Christmas Star of Bethlehem was not seen by observers who were in the east but was seen rising in the east (p. 114), that is, in the dawn sky (p. 113), symbolizing the coming of the messianic Morning Star (compare 2 Peter 1:19).

Royal elements are also strong in Matthew's Gospel, which unlike Luke's Gospel speaks of Herod, the king of the Jews, the magi, the Counselor, and the Prince of Peace. And temple elements in Matthew are consistent with Barker's finding that Matthew writes to those "in the house" (p. 96), namely converts, whose faith was being challenged. The announcement that Jesus would save people from their sins (p. 107) also has temple overtones.

But of all the sections in Margaret Barker's discussion of the Gospel of Matthew, I found her section on the Wise Men the most interesting and creative (pp. 115–23). Although it is possible that the Wise Men came from Mesopotamia as Zoroastrians or from India or points even farther to the east, the early Christian writer Justin Martyr said that they came from Arabia (p. 120), close to the Judean homeland. It would make sense, after all, that Jewish people would have been the ones most interested in the impending fulfillment of the Israelite prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah.

Indeed, a thread of anticipation that ran through the times surrounding the birth of Christ was a tradition about a group of temple priests who had long ago gone into exile into Arabia awaiting their chance to return. The Jerusalem Talmud, *Taʿanit* 4.5, knew of a tradition about priests who had fled from Jerusalem and settled in Arabia after King Josiah reformed the rituals and performances of the Temple of Solomon around 625 BC (p. 121). King Herod may also have created enemies when he built his own temple, further displacing some of the older priests from the Second Temple in Jerusalem, which the Temple of Herod replaced.

Is it possible, Barker wonders, that the Magi were a part of or related to these groups of watchful priests hoping for the coming of

their Lord of Holiness? If so, their gifts could not have been more perfectly suitable, given by priests to their new High Priest.

The gift of gold would sparkle like the gold that was required in the temple. According to scripture, the doors and altar (1 Kings 7:48), the table for the bread of the Presence (1 Kings 7:48), and the lampstands and drinking vessels of the temple (1 Kings 10:21) were to be made of pure gold (p. 118). Many other implements of the temple were gold-plated. Gold was seen as incorruptible and was thought to embody the radiance of the sun. The gift of frankincense provided the fragrance required by the Priestly Code for every sacrifice "offered by fire to the Lord" (Leviticus 24:7). Its sweet smoke carried prayers up to heaven. It was burned in the temple "to invoke the presence of the Lord" (p. 118). The gift of myrrh, another resin from the life-sustaining sap of a desert tree, was a key ingredient in making the oil of anointment that imparted holiness, which oil could not be used outside the temple (Exodus 30:25–33). Myrrh had disappeared from the holy of holies (p. 120) and "had been hidden away in the time of Josiah" according to the Babylonian Talmud, *Horayoth* 12a (p. 27). It "represented Wisdom (Ben Sira 24.15)" (p. 120) and was used in preparing the dead for burial, as has long been pointed out. But more than that, Barker shows that this vial of oil was known as the "dew of resurrection" and "had anointed the royal high priests after the order of Melchizedek and transformed them into sons of God" (p. 120). Early Christians, such as Pope Leo the Great, said, "He offers myrrh, who believes that God's only begotten son united to himself man's true nature" (p. 120), and thus Barker speaks of "the uniting of divine and human [having] been the mystery of the myrrh oil in the holy of holies" in the ancient temple of Jerusalem (p. 120).

Old traditions also spoke about Adam receiving gold, frankincense, and myrrh from three angelic messengers so that he could offer proper sacrifices when cast out of Eden (p. 119). With these holy and exemplary implements—inherently precious, sacredly treasured, and eternally efficacious—Jesus, as the Second Adam, was prepared to offer the ultimate temple sacrifice as the new and everlasting High Priest, bringing powers and eternal life from heaven above to earth

below (p. 119). Appropriately, then, Barker points out that "the word *miqqedem* can mean 'from ancient times' or 'from the east.'" Thus, when the magi came *miqqedem*, this can be seen as a sign that they came not just from the east but that, by them, "the ancient ways were being restored" (p. 119).

The Infancy Gospel of James

In chapter 5, Barker saves perhaps the best for last. In this chapter, she treats readers to a marvelous new look at the so-called Infancy Gospel of James. Little known and less read, this very early Christmas story is beginning to be taken more seriously. As Professor James Charlesworth said to me last year, "Its stock is rising." Clearly, it was a widespread telling of the Christmas story, multiply attested before the fourth century. This story purports to be told by James, a son of Joseph by a previous wife who had died, leaving him a widower.

Barker first provides an overview of the Infancy Gospel and asks a number of penetrating questions, always eager to notice plain and precious things that have been lost even though at one time they had been very important to certain segments of the faithful Christian community. She is right when she says that it would "be a mistake to dismiss the stories . . . as fantasy or worse" (p. 129). Following her introduction, she gives a full translation of this infancy story. Readers of *Christmas: The Original Story* might do well to read this chapter first, as well as last. The eccentric, esoteric, and sacred elements that are present here provide much of the energy that fuels Barker's interpretive machinery throughout this book. The Infancy Gospel of James combines many elements that can be found in Matthew or Luke, but here the functions and powers of the temple are even more prominent and therefore perhaps more original to the story.

This Christmas story begins with a rich man named Joachim and his wife, Anna. Because they had no children, Joachim doubled his gifts to the temple hoping that God would forgive him of whatever wrong he had done to cause their childlessness. An angel appeared to Anna and told her that she would conceive. Anna answered that whether it was a male or female child, she would offer it as a gift to

the Lord to serve him all its life. When an angel then told Joachim that his wife had conceived, he offered in the temple ten pure lambs to the priests, twelve tender calves to the elders, and one hundred kids for the people. As Joachim approached the altar, the gold plate on the high priest's turban showed Joachim that he was accepted of God and was not a sinner. When the baby was born, Anna called her Mary and turned her nursery into a holy place, promising to keep Mary pure until she was old enough to be given to the temple. At the age of three, when Mary was dedicated to the temple, she danced on the third step of the altar, and all the house of Israel loved her. Mary did not turn away from the temple when her parents entrusted her to the care of the high priest and walked away, leaving her there. She naturally felt at home in the temple. There she learned the ways and the hymns of the temple (perhaps thereby explaining how it was that Jesus knew so much about the temple at such a young age and why he quoted from the book of Psalms so spontaneously throughout his ministry).

When Mary turned twelve and passed puberty, she needed to leave the temple, and so the high priest had Zacharias call together at the temple all the widowers in the area. Out of that group, a guardian for Mary would be chosen by lot to keep her pure and continuously devoted only to God. One of the widowers who answered this call was Joseph. When his staff was selected and he became Mary's guardian, a dove flew out of his staff and landed on his head.

The priests soon decided to have a new veil of the temple woven by the women in Israel. Mary was chosen by lot to weave the purple and scarlet threads. This veil "hid the Glory of God from human eyes," and Mary's work on the veil "symbolized the process of incarnation" (pp. 142, 143). While spinning, Mary was told by the angel that she would miraculously bear the Son of the Highest. After she became pregnant, the angel assured Joseph that the child was from the Holy Spirit.

A few months later, when Joseph did not appear in the assembly of the elders, the high priest Annas visited him to see if he was all right, and while there he noticed that Mary was pregnant. To prove their innocence in this matter, both Joseph and Mary were required to appear at the temple to drink the bitter waters (see Numbers 5). When

they were exonerated by this ordeal, the high priest said, "If the Lord God has not revealed your sin, neither do I condemn you," and he let them go.

Going with Joseph to Bethlehem to register, Mary rode on a donkey. When she began to go into labor, Joseph found a cave and left Mary there with his sons while he went to find a midwife. Joseph told her that the woman to be delivered was Mary, the one who had been brought up in the temple. The midwife came and, seeing a great light in the cave and then seeing the child, testified of the miraculous virgin birth. Barker says of this account that "the cave is presented as the holy of holies," complete with its light brighter than the noonday sun (pp. 145, 147).

Soon the Wise Men came and Herod examined them. Following the star, they found the babe still in the cave. They gave him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Mary hid the babe in an ox's manger, and Herod tried to kill Jesus's cousin John, but Elizabeth fled with him into the hills. When Elizabeth's husband, Zacharias, would not tell where they had gone, he was killed in the temple, whereupon the panels of the temple wailed and split from top to bottom as his blood turned to stone.

From these highlights alone, readers can notice parts of the traditional Christmas story not found in the canonical gospels, such as Mary weaving, Mary riding on a donkey toward Bethlehem, and the ox in the stable. But more than that, here again the temple takes center stage, perhaps even more than in the other accounts. Having laid the foundation of temple themes in the Christmas stories of Luke and Matthew, Barker cannot be faulted for concluding: "There has been relatively little study of the *Protevangelium*. It is all too easy to dismiss, . . . but closer study shows how close it is in spirit to the earliest understanding of the Christmas story. Its influence has been enormous" (p. 150).

Concluding Thoughts

All of this is not to say that no questions or problems exist with some of the things Barker says in this book.

- She sees birth as a form of resurrection (p. 8), but it is unclear to me what to make of this.
- It is not always easy to tell where imagery ends and actual history begins for Barker, but this borderland is always fraught with perilous crossings.
- The ideas that Mary conceived by a beam of light coming into her ear (p. 59) and that she didn't see Gabriel may solve some problems, but they seem to raise others.
- I don't follow the point about the census (pp. 74–75), even if Psalm 87:6 should be understood as saying "in the census of the people, this one will be born there."
- It may well be that Egyptian Jews had not forgotten the Lady (p. 102), but is this enough to take our minds into the Gospel of Philip and all things Egyptian?
- The story of the woman taken in adultery and brought to Jesus in the temple in John 8:1–11 might have been a parable about how the Jews wanted to kill Mary as an adulterous woman (p. 107), but this idea seems like a stretch (when did they catch her in the very act?), even if the words in John 8:11 are paralleled in the Infancy Gospel of James when she and Joseph pass the ordeal of the bitter waters as a test of suspected adultery.
- Finally, for Latter-day Saints, a birth date in the autumn of 7 BCE (p. 115) may be difficult to reconcile with the datings in 3 Nephi, notwithstanding the planetary meeting of Saturn with Jupiter, "power with righteousness," in that year.

But be those things as they may be, my enthusiasm for this book is not diminished. Margaret Barker has become one of the most interesting topics of conversation among Latter-day Saint scholars in the recent decade, and justifiably so. Her stimulating ideas often, though not always, strike chords of powerful and beautiful harmonies with Latter-day Saint doctrines and interests.

This fascinating book on the original story of Christmas may intensify some hesitant reactions in some Latter-day Saint circles about her reconstructions of ancient Jewish and early Christian history, but I hope not. It will not be every Latter-day Saint family that

will want to give her a seat in front of their cozy fire on Christmas Eve. But all Latter-day Saints who begin with the assumption that many plain and precious things have not been preserved in the Christmas stories told in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and who are hoping to find in their intellectual Christmas stocking not a lump of coal but some long-forgotten diadems, will rarely be disappointed as they turn the pages of this book, often with glee at the new insights that Margaret Barker brings to bear on the generative story on the birth of the Messiah.

And we thought we knew this story! As the saying goes, wise men seek him still—seeking and hoping to behold the true beginnings of the most celebrated story ever told. Thus, all Latter-day Saints who relish the multivalence of the great Jehovah as Creator, Prophet, Priest, Messiah, Savior, Son, and King, and who love to sing carols about that O holy, silent, sacred night, should take great joy in adding many things in this book to their repertoire of treasured Christmas stories.