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VINDICATING JOSIAH

William J. Hamblin

Abstract: Margaret Barker has written a number of fascinating books on ancient Israelite and Christian temple theology. One of her main arguments is that the temple reforms of Josiah corrupted the pristine original Israelite temple theology. Josiah's reforms were therefore, in some sense, an apostasy. According to Barker, early Christianity is based on the pristine, original pre-Josiah form of temple theology. This paper argues that Josiah's reforms were a necessary correction to contemporary corruption of the Israelite temple rituals and theologies, and that the type of temple apostasy Barker describes is more likely associated with the Hasmoneans.

The discovery of the "Book of the Law" (generally thought to be Deuteronomy) in the Jerusalem temple during the reign of Josiah, and Josiah's subsequent reforms of Israelite religion and cult to bring them into conformity with the precepts of that book, have long been recognized as decisive moments in biblical history.¹ The origins of the Book of the Law and its meaning and implications have been debated by scholars for centuries. But no one denies the dominant sect of Israelite religion at the time of Jesus was strongly Deuteronomistic.² Deuteronomy's

1. Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3–32, discusses a range of scholarly theories regarding Josiah and the Book of the Law.

2. Deuteronomy is cited or alluded to dozens if not hundreds of times in the New Testament. See scripture index in Gregory K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI:

influence on subsequent Judaism and Christianity cannot be underestimated.

In modern biblical studies the term “Deuteronomist/s” refers to a group of authors, redactors and/or editors of part of the Bible.³ The Deuteronomistic books of the Bible are generally said to be Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings.⁴ When read in sequence and isolation, these books provide a complete history of Israel from Moses and the Sinai covenant to the Babylonian captivity, presented with a shared theological perspective. These books as a collection are generally called the Deuteronomistic History.

One of the key beliefs of the Deuteronomists is that there should be only one temple at Jerusalem. Since its construction by Solomon, sacrifice and worship were not permitted elsewhere. Likewise, only YHWH (JeHoVaH) can be worshipped by Israelites, though YHWH allows the other nations to worship their own gods (Deuteronomy 4:19). Thus the *Jerusalem temple alone*, and *YHWH alone* are the two founding principles of the Deuteronomists (Deuteronomy 12). However, biblical texts, artistic evidence, and archaeological evidence agree that throughout much of Israelite history many if not most Israelites followed *neither* of these two central Deuteronomistic mandates.⁵ Some scholars believe the Deuteronomistic ideology

Baker, 2007). There are twenty-nine manuscripts of Deuteronomy in the Dead Sea Scrolls, indicating its importance among first century Jews: Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1:198–202.

3. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow, *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 535–37.

4. Anthony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

5. Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); Beth A. Nakhai, *Archaeology and the Religions of Canaan and Israel* (Boston, MA : American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001); Ziony Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2003); Carol L. Meyers, *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture Of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress,

was in fact an innovation of the late seventh century BC, rather than representing an earlier ongoing sectarian movement within Israel whose ideas eventually crystalized into the Deuteronomistic books.

The centrality of the temple of Jerusalem in Deuteronomistic theology means that the Deuteronomistic history has much to say on the subject. According to the Deuteronomists, the corruption of the Jerusalem temple cult and the worship of other gods—which are essentially one and the same problem—were the primary reasons for God’s anger with Israel. Hezekiah (715–686 BC) and Josiah (640–609 BC) were the two greatest kings of Judah because they attempted to reform and purify the temple. Whereas the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BC because of their apostasy,⁶ Hezekiah’s reforms saved Jerusalem and its temple from a similar fate at the hands of the Assyrians in 701 BC (2 Kings 18–20). The subsequent apostasy of Hezekiah’s son Manasseh (686–642 BC)⁷ required a second temple reform movement initiated by Josiah (2 Kings 22–23). The ultimate failure of Josiah’s reform effort culminated in God unleashing the king of Babylon to punish the Israelites, destroying both Jerusalem and its temple (2 Kings 23:36–25:26). For the Deuteronomist, the failure of Judah to worship only YHWH and to worship him only in the temple of Jerusalem were the direct causes of the destruction of

2005); Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007); Victor H. Matthews, *Studying the Ancient Israelites: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007); William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Francesca Stavrakopoulou and John Baron, *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

6. 2 Kings 16–18, especially 2 Kings 18:12; The problem is most dramatically represented by the great struggle between Elijah against Ahab, Jezebel, and the priests of Baal, 1 Kings 17–19.

7. 2 Kings 21–22, especially 2 Kings 21:1–9.

the kingdom of Judah, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple of YHWH by the Babylonians in 586 BC.⁸

Enter Margaret Barker, the prolific biblical scholar who has spent her career attempting to elucidate the importance of the temple for ancient biblical religion and early Christianity.⁹ The following are her major arguments regarding the Deuteronomistic writers and the temple.

1. The original pre-Exilic temple cult and theology of Israel focused on visions, angelic manifestations, heavenly ascent, prophecy, revelation of divine wisdom, esoteric teachings and rituals, and theophany.¹⁰ It also included the veneration of a divine feminine figure associated with the biblical “Lady” Wisdom.¹¹
2. In the late seventh century, priests and courtiers of king Josiah, under the influence of the Deuteronomists, systematically downplayed, obscured, and suppressed many

8. On the history of this period, see the relevant chapters in: J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2006); L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and how Do We Know it?* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

9. See <http://www.margaretbarker.com>. See the appendix to this paper for a chronological list of her major books; her work will be cited by short title from this bibliography. For more details, and exploration of the implications for Mormons, see Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001), online at: <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/papers/?paperID=6>; and Kevin Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament,” *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 59–90, online at: <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/review/?vol=16&num=2&id=547>

10. On the pre-exilic temple cult: *Older Testament; Lost Prophet; Gate of Heaven; Great Angel; Temple Theology; Temple Mysticism; Mother of the Lord*. See appendix for full bibliographic data on Barker’s books.

11. On Lady Wisdom as a Mother goddess: *Older Testament*, 81–103; *Great Angel*, 48–69; *Great High Priest*, 229–261; *Temple Theology*, 75–93; all summarized and expanded in her new 2012 book *Mother of the Lord*.

of these elements of the original ancient Israelite temple cult.¹²

3. These ancient temple beliefs and practices, however, survived among other minority Israelite religious groups and movements. This earlier temple theology is reflected in the noncanonical Israelite books such as those found in the pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹³
4. At least some of the ideas of Jesus and the earliest New Testament Christians were related to these temple-oriented movements.¹⁴
5. Earliest Christianity included all these suppressed or hidden temple beliefs, rituals, and practices, such as Jesus as the cosmic king and high priest (Hebrews), and the possibility of visionary ascent to heaven for a theophany of God in His celestial temple (Revelation).¹⁵

For Margaret Barker, then, the reforms of Josiah were in fact a type of apostasy, which placed the Deuteronomists in positions of power in the state and temple, allowing them to suppress the authentic pre-exilic temple theology, mysteries, and ritual, which were eventually restored by Christianity—which may imply that much of the Old Testament as we have it was written and edited by apostates.

Although I accept much of her broader thesis, I disagree with Barker on several key issues, which I do not think are

12. On Josiah's reforms as suppression of pre-exilic temple cult: *Older Testament*; *Great Angel*; *Mother of the Lord*, 5–75, and various passages throughout her work.

13. On the survival of pre-exilic temple mysteries: *Older Testament*; *Lost Prophet*; *Gate of Heaven*; *Great Angel*; *Hidden Tradition*; *Temple Mysticism*; *Mother of the Lord*.

14. On New Testament Christianity as a restoration of the pre-exilic temple mysteries: *Great Angel*, 162–232; *On Earth as it is in Heaven*; *Revelation*; *Temple Theology*; *Hidden Tradition*, 77–130; *Temple Mysticism*.

15. On the continuity between early post-New Testament Christianity and the pre-exilic temple cult: *Great High Priest*; *Temple Theology*; *Hidden Tradition*; *Temple Themes*; *Temple Mysticism*.

fundamental to the validity of her broader perspective. First, I do not believe there was ever a single pre-exilic temple theology.¹⁶ One of the fundamental principles of interpreting ancient Israelite religion and early Judaism is that when you have two rabbis, you will always have three or more opinions. This is, of course, simply part of human nature. Sectarian tendencies in Israelite religion were undoubtedly just as strong in pre-exilic times (before 586 BC) as they were in early Judaism of the second temple period (c. 500 BC–AD 70), rabbinic Judaism (after AD 70), and early Christianity. Thus, in my opinion, in pre-exilic times there were already many different interpretations of temple theology and mysticism in ancient Israel. I believe Barker occasionally attempts to conflate this broad range of Israelite temple ideologies reductionistically into a single unified theology.

Second, whereas Barker tends to depict Israelite temple theology as relatively static, I believe it changed significantly through time. Thus, when Barker speaks of third century BC Enochian temple theology as reflecting pre-exilic ideas, I believe it likely she is at least partially conflating ideas from different early Jewish movements, times, places, and sects. The result is that she sometimes fails to contextualize her sources properly and historically and fully consider the importance of historical change through time. This means she often *retrojects* temple ideas from later centuries onto pre-exilic temple theology. In my opinion it is very unlikely that the survival of the temple of ideologies of the seventh century BC remained unchanged and static through the first century AD. I believe it is very important to contextualize temple texts that Barker

16. See the books cited in note 5 for discussions of the sects and beliefs in ancient Israelite religion.

studies in their proper time and sect, though this can, of course, sometimes be somewhat obscure.¹⁷

Third, whereas Barker claims that Josiah's reforms represented an apostasy from the pre-Deuteronomistic temple theology, I believe the situation is much more complex. We need to realize that the Deuteronomists represent Josiah's reforms as a *restoration* of the original pristine Mosaic temple theology. What we really have are two (or more) competing visions of what *authentic* ancient Israelite temple theology originally was and hence ought to be. Barker takes the Deuteronomist position and turns it on its head. For Barker, the Deuteronomist reforms were an apostate innovation which attempted to suppress the original authentic pre-exilic temple worship. I believe instead that sectarian complexity in temple theology, ritual, and mysticism was already the norm in pre-exilic Israel.

Finally, I believe that Josiah's reforms were necessary and inspired. The first thing to note is that no biblical prophet ever opposed or criticized Josiah's reforms. No biblical prophet ever endorsed the worship of the goddess Asherah.¹⁸ No biblical prophet ever endorsed the worship of any god other than YHWH. No biblical prophet ever endorsed the worship of idols. Now, one could in theory argue this is because the Deuteronomists decided which books to include in the Bible and consciously suppressed alternative viewpoints from non-Deuteronomistic prophets. But the fact remains that in the surviving texts, *all* the prophets agree with at least these three basics of Josiah's reforms:

17. In this regard Hugh Nibley is sometimes similarly weak in properly contextualizing his ancient sources.

18. Generally mistranslated as "groves" in the KJV. On Asherah, see: Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*; Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1988); Bob Becking, et al., *Only One God?: Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah* (London: Continuum, 2002); Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah: With Further Considerations of the Goddess* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007).

(1) Israel should worship only YHWH; Israel must not worship foreign gods; (2) Israel must not worship idols (or worship YHWH as an idol), or follow other Canaanite cultic practices; and, to the extent they discuss it, (3) Israel must worship only in the Jerusalem temple. Even Ezekiel, whom Barker sees as one of the most important prophets of authentic temple theology and mysticism, agrees with these principles¹⁹ and insists that failure to follow these three principles was the cause for the departure of the Glory/*kābôd* of YHWH from the temple (Ezekiel 10), leaving it ripe for destruction by the Babylonians.

Why did Josiah believe these reforms were necessary? The fundamental problem was syncretism. The ancient Israelites were given numerous laws whose primary purpose was to distinguish them from non-Israelites. Circumcision, the types of clothing one could not wear (Deuteronomy 22:11–12), permitted hair styles (Leviticus 21:5), forbidden foods, marriage only to Israelites, and various cultic restrictions were all designed at least in part to prevent the Israelites from losing their distinct religious and ethnic identity. The reason the Jews survived the Babylonian captivity with their religion and identity relatively intact was precisely because of their refusal to syncretize with the culture and religion of their captors. The reason the Jews are one of the very few ancient Near Eastern peoples whose religion survives to the present is the restrictions on their syncretizing with foreign cultures and religions.²⁰ Without Josiah's reforms, the Jews would probably not have survived the Babylonian captivity or Hellenistic and Roman occupations. They would have ended like the ten tribes

19. On the worship of gods besides YHWH, see Ezekiel 8. On rejection of idols, see Ezekiel 6, 14:3–7, 20:7–39, 44:19–12, and many other passages. In a future article I will examine the details of the positive relationship between Jeremiah and Deuteronomy.

20. The most important source of ongoing syncretism from the third century BC on was Hellenism. See *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, 696–99, 723–26 for summary and bibliography.

of Israel, losing their identity in the captivity. There would have been no Judaism in the first century AD and hence no Jesus and no Christianity. Josiah's strict antisyncretizing reforms of Israelite religious belief, practice, and cult insured the survival of the Jews. Centralization of Jewish worship in the Jerusalem temple was necessary because the provincial cultic sites were the major centers of cultic syncretism.

This does not, however, necessarily mean that nothing was lost. The exoteric, public temple cult of Israel is repeatedly criticized by the prophets for its sterile ritualism.²¹ There were clearly sectarian movements within Israel which rejected part or even all of the temple esoterica and secret teachings, as Barker describes throughout her books. It is important to remember that Barker is able to envision the lost temple theology of pre-exilic Israel precisely because it was never actually completely lost. It survived among esoteric groups of temple priests, such as Ezekiel and Joshua the High Priest (Zechariah 3:1–10, 6:11) as well as among sectarian Jewish movements, most notably at Qumran as reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls²² and in esoteric temple texts found in part in the Pseudepigrapha.²³

I believe a more fundamental apostasy of Jerusalem temple theology, ritual, and mysteries occurred in the mid-second century BC when the Hasmoneans usurped both Davidic kingship and the Zadokite high priesthood,²⁴ while consciously

21. For example, Jeremiah 7:4; Hosea 6:6; Ecclesiastes 5:1.

22. Geza . Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin Press, 1998); see *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2:921–933 for numerous references and bibliography.

23. James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–85).

24. For background on the Hasmoneans (Maccabees) see *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, 705–709. On the Hasmonean usurpation of the High Priesthood, see the relevant sections in Maria Brutti, *The Development of the High Priesthood during the Pre-Hasmonean Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Alice Hunt, *Missing Priests: The Zadokites in Tradition and History* (London,

suppressing prophecy. This usurpation resulted in a schism when Onias IV, considered by many to be the true successor to the Zadokite high priest, fled for his life to Egypt, where he built an alternate temple at Leontopolis which functioned from around 160 BC–AD 73.²⁵ The Qumran community likewise fled into the wilderness and went underground at about that time, creating their own esoteric interpretation of the temple mysteries. Thus, by the late second century BC, there were at least three separate rival temple theologies: Leontopolis (largely unrecoverable), Jerusalem, and Qumran, each rejecting the others and claiming exclusive authority. There were undoubtedly many other movements as well.

The Hasmoneans were not averse to killing those who rejected their priestly authority. Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC) slew thousands of Jews who threw their citrons at him during the feast of Sukkot as Alexander tried to act as High Priest,²⁶ reflecting the fact that most of the people rejected Hasmonean claims to the High Priesthood. Jannaeus's crucifixion of 800 opponents of his rule also reflects the nature of Hasmonean tyranny and their compulsion to punish those who questioned their royal or priestly authority.²⁷ After the fall of the Hasmoneans, selection of the High Priest eventually fell into the hands of Roman overlords, leading to the corruption of the office and the temple²⁸ as frequently decried in the New Testament.

T&T Clark, 2006); D. Rooke, *Zadok's Heirs: The Role and Development of the High Priesthood in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

25. For details and bibliography, see G. Bohak, "Heliopolis," *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, 721–23.

26. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.372–76.

27. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.256, 13.380.

28. On the corruption of the first century AD High Priests and their collaboration with the Romans, see R. Horsley, "High Priests and the Politics of Roman Palestine: A Contextual Analysis of the Evidence in Josephus," *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 17 (1986): 23–55; see also the books in note 24.

The Hasmonean suppression of prophecy is described in 1 Maccabees 14:41, when the people and priests declared that “Simon should be king and high priest in perpetuity until a true prophet should arise.” This Hasmonean hope for a future “true” prophet reflected an assumption that there were no contemporary authentic prophetic voices. In fact, the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls claimed prophetic authority and strongly rejected Simon’s priestly claims.²⁹ But as opponents of the Hasmoneans, they were not considered “true” prophets, and because no prophet spoke in support of the Hasmonean usurpation, the official Hasmonean view was that there were no “true” prophets.³⁰

Thus, while I agree with Barker that there was a corruption and apostasy of ancient Israelite temple theology, mysticism, and cult in ancient Israel, I believe it occurred in the second century BC, not the seventh. Much of Barker’s theories about the temple and early Christianity are still valid if the temple apostasy occurred in the second century rather than the seventh. I believe Josiah’s reform of the temple cult was both necessary and inspired and was not in itself the cause of a temple apostasy described by Barker.

William J. Hamblin is Professor of History at Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah, USA), specializing in the ancient and medieval Near East. He is the author of dozens of academic articles and several books, most recently, Solomon’s Temple: Myth and History, with David Seely (Thames and Hudson, 2007). In the fall of 2010 his first novel was published (co-authored with Neil Newell): The Book of Malchus (Deseret Book, 2010). A fanatical traveler and photographer, he spent 2010 teaching

29. Simon, or the entire line of Hasmonean high priests, are often thought to be the “Wicked Priest” of the Dead Sea Scrolls; *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2:876–878, 2:973–976.

30. The Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus (134–104 BC) claimed prophetic authority, Josephus, *Wars*, 1.68–69; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.282–283.

at the BYU Jerusalem Center, and has lived in Israel, England, Egypt and Italy, and traveled to dozens of other countries.

Appendix: Margaret Barker Bibliography of Major Books (Chronological Order)

The Older Testament. The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and early Christianity (London: SPCK 1987, reprinted Sheffield: Phoenix Press 2005).

The Lost Prophet. The Book of Enoch and its Influence on Christianity (London, SPCK 1988, reprinted Sheffield: Phoenix Press 2005)

The Gate of Heaven. the History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem (London SPCK, 1991, reprinted Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2008)

The Great Angel. A Study of Israel's Second God (London: SPCK, 1992)

On Earth as it is in Heaven. Temple Symbolism in the New Testament (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995)

The Risen Lord; the Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000)

The Great High Priest. The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy (London and New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2003)

Temple Theology: An Introduction (London: SPCK 2004)

An Extraordinary Gathering of Angels (London: MQP 2004)

The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom (London: SPCK, 2007)

Temple Themes in Christian Worship (London: T&T Clark 2008)

Christmas: The Original Story (London: SPCK, 2008)

Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment (London: T&T Clark, 2009)

Temple Mysticism: an Introduction (London: SPCK, 2011)

The Mother of the Lord: The Lady in the Temple (London: Bloomsbury, 2012)

