



Type: Book Chapter

Questions and Answers with Margaret Barker and Laurence Hemming

Author(s): Margaret Barker and Laurence Hemming

Source: *Mormonism and the Temple: Examining an Ancient Religious Tradition*

Editor(s): Gary N. Anderson

Publisher: Logan, UT; Academy for Temple Studies, 2013

Page(s): 43–46



BYU Studies is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to BYU Studies and to scholarly research on The Book of Mormon. Archived by permission of BYU Studies.

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>

Questions and Answers with Margaret Barker and Laurence Hemming

Jack Welch: Margaret, to begin, would you like to comment on anything that Laurence said?

Margaret Barker: The idea of the temple in the center of cities goes right back to Exodus 25: “Build me a holy place that I may be seen to be in your midst.” And I know they’re not making land in city centers anymore, so it’s rather expensive, but to be somewhere that’s central is very important.

Welch: Wonderful. Now a question to both of you: what kind of reception do you get for your ideas among other Christians and philosophers? How do your ideas strike people? Are you viewed as being too combative, or are people accepting what you’re saying?

Barker: Well, I spend a lot of my time going round to speak to groups of clergy in England—conferences, bishop study days, all that kind of thing, and they love it. There’s one or two who are not very happy and they wriggle, but by and large, I mean my schedule is full because they love it. So that’s the answer. I had a lovely compliment from a rabbi in London who said, “Thank you for giving us back our temple.” And I thought, wasn’t that lovely? People want to know about it simply because they are recognizing that this is something very important that the church has just lost touch with, and it affects every aspect of our life: the shape of church buildings, the shape of liturgies, all sorts of things. My particular interest is of course environment studies, and yes, I’m kept very busy—too busy, in fact. So yes, it’s very well received.

Laurence Hemming: I would say that my experiences with theologians have been somewhat different

from my experiences with philosophers. My philosophical work is connected with my work in temple studies but not in ways that would be obvious to my, let’s say, more secular readers. Nevertheless, a lot of my philosophical work centers around what it means to understand God and the gods in the historical philosophical tradition. I think that question is falling open over time. When I was an undergraduate student, aggressive atheism was the mark of the day. I don’t find that to be the case anymore. I think that among Catholics, it’s more complicated because we had the Second Vatican Council, which ushered in radical change throughout the Catholic Church, and I think that the Catholic Church is still digesting that change and still coming to terms with it. There is a fundamental shift, I think, among younger Catholics and younger clergy. As Catholics, we tend to go overboard when we do something. To some extent, we threw the baby out with the bathwater and now have to find the baby again. When you explain the meanings of some of these things, there is an absolute fascination. A lot of the initial bewilderment, rather than hostility, falls away. There’s a real thirst for what we’ve lost. I also interpret this as a divine gift because sometimes the way God reminds us—sometimes God says things to us nicely and sometimes not so. In the confirmation ceremony in the Catholic Church, in the old way it was done and the way it was done that Sunday I visited St. Louis, I was reminded that the bishop touches each person being confirmed on the cheek. It’s meant to be a slap and one interpretation of the gesture is that not everything that God will give

you will be comfortable. Sometimes we remember things by waking up to the uncomfortable realization of what we've forgotten. And I think that's where the Catholic Church is at the present time. It just makes some Catholic theologians feel a little grumpy. I can live with that.

Welch: I'm sure that many people do receive what you're saying with great enthusiasm and find that it has a lot of challenging, wonderful, ethical, and religious motivation and inspiration for them. Several of the questions, though, have asked more specific things, such as this one: Margaret, I know you've written a lot about Jesus Christ and Jehovah being one deity. We Latter-day Saints believe that, and we get a lot of pushback for it. Do you run into a similar thing? And Laurence, for you along the same line: we see a distinction between Aaronic Priesthood and Melchizidek Priesthood. Do other people see that distinction or do you get pushback from people when you talk about Melchizidek priesthood?

Barker: The position that I put out in my book *The Great Angel*, namely that Jesus was Yahweh and was recognized as such by the early Christians, this was initially received with horror: "Goodness, what else will she be saying next?" And then I said, "Well, can you find me evidence to the contrary in the first two centuries?" And then, things started to quiet down a little. It's quite interesting. I think that we have lived with assumptions—and I call that laziness—in biblical scholarship for far too long. We must ask, "Where do you get this from?" Some of the rather more violent theories of Atonement that I encounter amongst extreme evangelicals, I say, "Where is this in the Bible?" It's like dealing with journalists that tell you what the Bible says and you say, "I'm sorry, could you show me where?" and they don't come back. You have to be two hundred percent confident of what you're going to say before you say something because you're dealing with people's faith and belief. A lot of people repeat what they have been told, probably in college, and they don't ever question it. As a Protestant preacher, I would always start with the Bible;

I would never preach anything but the Bible. But the text is illuminated from other sources, and maybe these verses don't mean what we have always assumed they mean. I do a Good Friday service every year; it's one of the things you have to do. And I find it much more meaningful to do it within a temple framework, and so do the people for whom I lead this service. And I think that is the test, because Methodist tradition is well known for people who sort of grab the preacher by the collar outside afterwards and say, "What did you mean when you said that?" And you have to answer to your congregation in a big way. And the ordinary people—of course, there's no such thing as ordinary people—but you know what I mean, the people who sit in pews on Sunday, they accept this and they're very happy and they're the consumers. And I don't actually worry too much about the academics. If my congregations are happy who are living the faith, I can cope with the academics.

Hemming: Jack's question touches on something. There have been some references to my struggle to work out the way in which Priesthood is manifesting itself in our liturgical texts. That confirmation that I attended in St. Louis exactly explains it. In our older, unreformed ordination rites—the ordination of the deacon, a priest, or a bishop—in each case, they refer to the ordaining of a Levite. But in each case, a higher form of Levite: the deacons are the Levites, the priests are the priestly priests who are taken from the ranks of the Levites because only a priest can be ordained from someone who's already been ordained a deacon, and it's obvious from those texts that a bishop is a high priest. That bringing of the vestments down from the altar is the transformation of a Levitical priest into a Melchizidek priest for the purpose of an ordinance. The Melchizidek priesthood is an eternal priesthood, and fundamentally it is the Priesthood of Christ, which a bishop or a priest or even a deacon holds in a certain way but only exercises in certain functions. Now that's my understanding of it. I could go into a lot more detail. I know of no other Catholic theologian

who understands it in that way, and yet when I explain it, I get immediate recognition. One of my closest friends is now a significant figure in the hierarchy, and I sent him my paper because I was a bit worried. I thought maybe I'd get rapped on the knuckles for saying this. He wrote back to me and said, "We've been using your paper on the Melchizedek priesthood." Well, I talked actually in this paper about the way we make the Holy Oils. We don't make them like that anymore. I wish we did. The old ceremonies of the making of the oils were quite startling and clearly very ancient. He said, "I've been leading in my group among my staff, and we've been using this paper because we're trying to understand Priesthood." I was hugely relieved. We talked privately, and he said, "I think you're absolutely right." He said that because he's involved with many liturgical texts and so he knows them inside and out, and he knows that these words are there, that this is the authentic way to interpret those texts. What I get from people who don't want to hear it is a bewildered silence. But in key places, I get recognition of what I believe the texts point towards. I don't think I'm doing anything which is contrary to my own tradition.

Welch: Several questions have been asked dealing with the use of terminology, titles especially, that you seem to be using in a different way than they are usually used. For example, the word "Adam": is that a person or is it a title or both? And how does "Adam" relate to "angels"? You used the word "angel" to refer to something other than what we would normally think of. You've written a whole book on angels, *The Great Angel*, but how is the word "angel" to be understood? You've given the word "resurrection" a different range of meanings. The word "Wisdom" is not just being wise in a proverbial sense, but Wisdom as a female deity. Likewise, the word "Council," and so on. Do you want to just talk generally, about how do we know when a word is being used as a title or in some kind of nominalist way, and when it's being used in the more ordinary sense of the word?

Barker: I think the answer to that is by trial and error.

If you start off by thinking or looking and saying, "I wonder if the places where I find "Adam" in the Hebrew scriptures—that's not just in Genesis—does it make more sense to substitute the idea of an individual or does it just represent humanity?" Ask that sort of question. And when you do this with words—I've done it with Adam, I've done it with various forms of Zadok and Zadik, the word that means "righteous one," things like that—if you try that in the text and suddenly the text is as though you switched a light on, then I think to myself that possibly this was more likely to be the way it was originally intended. So I do it simply by trial and error. Putting different English, doing different English translations of various Hebrew bits, saying, Does this actually make more sense if you put it like this? It's the same when I do my repointing exercises because of course the ancient text would not point words. Pointing means putting vowels in them. Does it make more sense if you put these vowels or these other vowels? Sometimes you get gobbledygook, and sometimes a light comes on and you say, oh my goodness, I can see why those were changed. So it is literally trial and error and collecting things that seem to work. And very often they do. And then sometimes you'll find an ancient journal article or something like that, that came to the same conclusion. It is very reassuring when that happens, but I don't actually start from that. I actually experiment with the text and the ancient versions.

Welch: And sometimes it can be both meanings of a word, can't it?

Barker: Yes, sometimes I would say it can be both because of this word play. Reading word play is something I wish I were better at, but there are many places in the Hebrew text where you could read it with its customary pointing, its Masoretic pointing, and then you could look at it again and say, well, what would happen if I put different vowels round that word? It would give different emphasis. Words sound very similar, and you get a different meaning. Hebrew prophets often

used word plays. You go to other passages of the same prophet, or looking at other Old Testament texts, you can see that there are two meanings here, the good meaning and the bad meaning. This is a long job and it's a process of trial and error. There is a lot of trial in it and a lot of error. But, eventually interesting things emerge, and then you discover the same word play popping

up elsewhere. But in translation to Greek, some word play is lost. So that's how it works.

Welch: Very good. I guess with the trial and error and repetition, that's why you have to keep going back to the temple.

Barker: Yes, you always have to go back for everything.