

Margaret Barker,

*The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom of God.*

London: SPCK, 2007. Pp. 144.

The book under review is part of Margaret Barker's 'Temple Theology' project. In keeping with that project, in this book she elucidates in its complexity the Jewish heritage of early Christianity, as against, for example, the view that Christianity is characteristically a product of the interaction of Jewish religion and Greek philosophy. The project is cumulative, and in consequence the argument in this book moves very briskly. As a result, earlier conclusions are sometimes presupposed but unstated, and this may be slightly confusing. (For this reason, one looks forward to the imminent publication of Barker's *Temple Theology: An Introduction*.) The argument ranges over an exceptionally wide body of literature. Not only are the major variants of Scripture (the *Vetus Latina*, the Aramaic *targumim*, the Masoretic text . . . ) in evidence, Barker complements her presentation by drawing liberally from Old Testament apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, from the Talmud and the Mishnah, from the Qumran documents and from early Christian and contemporary Jewish authors, not to mention judicious references to Anselm of Laon and Dante!

From these sources, Barker draws together three major themes – the Temple, Wisdom, the Kingdom – in a way that helps her readers understand the richness of familiar images. As she notes:

Like the first Christians, we still pray 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', but many of the complex system of symbols and stories that describe the Kingdom are no longer recognized for what they are (p. 128).

It is the great strength of Barker's Temple Theology that it promotes an awareness of the complex relationship of those symbols. For, as she states, these themes resonate in contemporary Christianity:

'The Kingdom vision inspires Christians worldwide, and debate about the Kingdom now determines attitudes towards economic and environmental issues: are we fellow workers with the Creator to bring the creation to its completed state when all things are good, or do we wait for all things to decline towards destruction so that there can be a new creation? There are many variations on this theme that influence the most pressing issues of our time. (p. 104).

Barker's overarching vision is bold and she states it clearly. Some readers may be reluctant to accept it in all its particulars. Consider this claim about Revelation: '*This suggests it was already accepted as Scripture, even before John gave it a written form and its explanation*' (p. 88, italics in the original). This straightforward assertion raises some questions. The most pointed is, accepted by whom? We know from Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.4 that the Revelation of John was regarded as being disputed at best, if not outright rejected. So we may well ask how recognisable to early Christians in general would Barker's composite account of early Christian temple theology in fact have been. Here, the breadth of sources is again

relevant. It is jarring to find claims from the Gospel of Thomas set alongside claims from canonical sources with no ado. Maybe this is a good thing, but it raises the question of whether Barker is retrieving from history an integrated system of beliefs or is instead synthesising a vision from disparate writings that speaks to modern concerns. The vision is stirring, often persuasive, but the use of eclectic sources does give one pause.

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