

THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

***Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (Margaret Barker, T&T Clark, London 2008)**

***Christmas – The original story* (Margaret Barker, SPCK, London 2008)**

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March 2009

Margaret Barker is an independent scholar, Methodist lay preacher, past President of the Society for Old Testament Studies and a recent recipient of a DD from Archbishop Rowan Williams. For the past 20 years she has produced a series of studies (variously described as original, brilliant, and arresting), which chart her ever deeper investigations into the meaning of the Hebrew scriptures, the tradition of the Temple and the roots of Christian belief in the Trinity, the Divinity of Christ, the resurrection, the priesthood, the sacraments of initiation and Eucharist, and the significance of the Mother of God, that she cogently argues are integral to them. Her argument rests on well evidenced conclusions that the Hebrew Scriptures which we rely on for translations of the Old Testament were re-edited, amended and cut after the New Testament books were written, in order to deny proofs and support for the beliefs of the first Christians. Essentially, during the Second Temple's history the dispossessed first Temple priesthood kept alive popular hope in the old Holy of Holies (emptied in the successor version), its sacred contents, and the old rites for the throning of a righteous king as high priest and his adoption and new birth as Son of God – themes which enabled Jesus to be readily recognised as the Lord's anointed and the Divine Son. Thus the baptism of Christ re-enacts the old Temple Liturgy for transforming the king-priest into the Son of God, embodying the living presence among his people of the Lord. So (citing St Basil) she gives an account of how the sign of the Cross at Baptism, the eucharistic epiclesis and the anointing with chrism – and the matter of baptism and of the Eucharist themselves - are resurfacings

of widely held Jewish popular religious belief, shared in the time of Jesus and throughout the first century by Jews and Christians alike. *Christmas* applies the same treatment to the Gospel narratives of the nativity and infancy, the significance of Mary, her Virginity and its perpetuity, and makes a case for the reliability of the Infancy Gospel of James as an account of what early Christians believed. She also points out that a number of Jewish 'pseudepigrapha' and other deuterocanonical books were conservations by Christians of earlier texts later amended to counter Christian claims about them and so sustain a distinctive Judaism; and that a number of them (such as the Book of Enoch) were considered as what we would now call canonical – so indicating what people were believing at the time, whatever the Church decided about their lasting status later. I mention these stimulating books, not only because they compel you to look afresh at old assumptions about the formation of the Scriptures and the way that affects our proclamation in preaching and theology, but also because the innovative research has attracted the support and academic reassessment of biblical scholars and Church leaders right across the traditions – Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Reformed. John Fenton once told me that Dom Henry Wansborough's *Death and Passion of Jesus* (DLT 2003) signified that the Catholic and Protestant methods of biblical criticism had come into full and visible communion. Nothing stays the same and Barker's approach and conclusions are very different. But here again in Scriptural studies of the highest quality, and popular accessibility, there is vigorous ecumenism and indeed visible communion.