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Latest METI Book Probes Soul, Self-Knowledge

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! Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 23 | 2003

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Biblical Scholar Presents Lectures at BYU

During the week of 5–9 May, the Institute sponsored a visit by British biblical scholar Margaret Barker to Brigham Young University. Each morning, Barker offered a seminar (usually three hours in length) to a group of invited faculty and guests in which she summarized her research and numerous publications. She also delivered a university forum address during her stay, as well as an evening public lecture in the auditorium of the Harold B. Lee Library.

Barker uses the apocryphal Enoch literature as a window into a distinct tradition of ancient Hebrew religious belief—one that, she believes, goes back to the Judaism of the First (or Solomon) Temple but has been obscured by the reforms of King Josiah and the so-called Deuteronomists. She argues that much has been lost or suppressed from the text of the Old Testament as we now have it,

including, for instance, the understanding that Yahweh, or Jehovah, was a distinct divine being, the son of El, the Father God.

In her seminars and public lectures, Barker, who is a Methodist and a trainer of Methodist preachers, treated a number of themes that were, to put it mildly, very congenial to her Latter-day Saint audience. She contended, for example, that a grasp of the ancient temple is essential to a proper understanding of the New Testament, and she noted the temple's connection with such matters as the story of creation, the veil (which, on one level at least, represents the flesh of mortality) separating this world from the realm of divine beings, ascension into the heavenly presence of God, and apotheosis (human divinization). She emphasized the significance of such figures as Enoch and Melchizedek, and the significance of the priesthood of Melchizedek, in the older Jewish tradition. Moreover, she devoted one morning of the seminar to a discussion of “the Lost Lady of Israel,” Asherah, or Wisdom,

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Latest METI Book Probes Soul, Self-Knowledge

A parallel English-Arabic text of the Islamic philosophical work *Iksir al-Arifin*, or *Elixir of the Gnostics*, is the latest publication in the Islamic Translation Series, part of the Institute's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. The author, Sadr al-Din Muhammad Shirazi, better known as Mulla Īadrā (A.D. 1572–1640), is considered one of the greatest Islamic philosophers of the last 600 years and in recent years has become one of the most well known. Adept at finding flaws in the work of previous great thinkers, he was at the same time able to think independently of them, creating his own philosophical approach that he called “transcendent philosophy.” This approach combined

reason, intellectual intuition, illumination, and revelation to arrive at truth.

Series editor D. Morgan Davis says that *Elixir of the Gnostics* is “a very interesting example of how Islam was influenced by Neoplatonism and classical Persian religious notions. It is a cogent summary of ‘the big picture’ as it was envisioned by some Muslim thinkers in the Middle Ages.”

Elixir demonstrates Mulla Īadrā's skill as a scholar and philosopher in that it adapts and expands on Afdal al-Din Kashani's 13th-century Persian work, the *Jawidan-nama* (The Book of the Everlasting). The work deals with the importance of self-knowledge in the soul's journey, which ends where it begins—with God. Self-knowledge is the means by which the

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who was once thought to be the consort of Elohim and was symbolized by a tree.¹

Participants in the seminar were delighted to receive copies of her richly fascinating latest book, fresh from the press, entitled *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2003). ! —reported by Daniel C. Peterson

Note

1. On this same theme, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191–243; see also an abridged version of that same article, “Nephi and His Asherah,” *JBMS* 9/2 (2000): 16–25.

The relevance of Margaret Barker’s scholarship to the Book of Mormon has been surveyed in a FARMS publication by Kevin Christensen titled “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies” (*FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 [2001]). For purchasing information, visit the Bookstore section of the FARMS Web site.

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soul, having been created in the divine image, realizes its full potential. Mulla Íadrā defines the soul’s progress as a gradual disengagement from all embodiment and materiality and a return to its transcendent essence. He maintains that philosophy is the most direct path to achieve this self-knowledge and progression.

William C. Chittick, translator of *Elixir* from Arabic, received his Ph.D. from the University of Tehran and is currently a professor of comparative studies at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He specializes in Islamic intellectual history and has authored or served as editor for more than 20 books on Islamic philosophy and theology.

In May 2003, on the occasion of the publication of *Elixir* at BYU, Professor Chittick visited campus and delivered two lectures. The first provided a basic and very accessible introduction to Sufism, or what some refer to as Islamic mysticism. The following day, Chittick lectured on the philosophy of the Origin and the Return, the central theme of *Elixir* and an important motif in Islamic philosophy generally. It argues that God is the source of the human soul and, as such, is the final destiny to which it will inevitably and finally return.

To purchase a copy of *Elixir* of the Gnostics, visit the Book Orders section of the METI Web site at <http://meti.byu.edu/orders.php>. !

Insights

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Institute for the Study and
Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts
Brigham Young University

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