

Response to Laurence Hemming *Worship as Revelation*.

Margaret Barker

My first reaction to this book was: 'Here is yet another area of which I know very, very little.' But as I read, I realised that the subject was in fact familiar: the joining of heaven and earth in liturgy, the centrality of the vision, and how 'I see' joins spiritual perception and intellectual understanding.

Worship as Revelation is a title reminding us that the original prescription for Jewish and then Christian worship was revealed in the regulations for building the tabernacle and the temple, not only the size and shape of the structure, but down to the smallest details of vestments and incense, furniture and anointing oil.

It was in this setting that revelation was given. The LORD was seen to be in the midst - not only the midst of their worship but also in the midst of their world view. The greatest blessing for Israel was that the face or presence of the LORD would shine on his people to give them life and peace [the gist of the high priestly blessing in Numbers 6], and yet in the early Christian period, it was forbidden for a Jew to expound the meaning of these important and familiar words. This must have been a sensitive issue, and the most obvious cause of such sensitivity would have been that these words were important for Christian claims. Something was revealed in Christian worship.

How great, then, is our loss of the actual words of the temple liturgies. For all we know, we may still have them in the earliest Christian liturgies. We have the psalms, but very little indication of how they were actually used in the temple. The patterns that passed into Christian practice, which Laurence sets out, could be very old indeed. The unwritten traditions mentioned so often by the earliest Fathers of the Church, all seem to refer to the liturgy and sacraments.

This is also true of Laurence's observations on, for example, the similarity between the observance of the octave of Easter and the dedication of the temple. One of the

curiosities of early Christian practice is that the imagery and even the lectionary associated with the Jewish autumn new year – atonement, judgement and renewing the temple – passed into the Christian patterns for holy week, Good Friday and Easter; Good Friday and the Day of Atonement being another clear example.

Laurence raises important questions about the relationship between Scripture and liturgy, and the relative ‘weight’ of each in the development and expression of the Faith. The disastrous ‘secularisation’ of biblical studies in the last century or so, springing from German literary criticism and so-called scientific method, has been allowed to drive revision of the liturgy in way that, on reflection, seems unbelievable. I had no idea, until I read this book, that even Rome had adopted the family meal approach to the Eucharist, with everyone gathered round a table. Losing, or even reducing, the covenant and atonement that is at the very heart of the Eucharist must surely lead us to ask: ‘What, then, is left?’

I realised too, as I read several times the philosophy sections of the book [‘several readings’ was not because they were unclear, but because their implications were dawning on me] just how much the original Christian tradition has been infused with - and dare I say confused with - the ways of Greek philosophy. The God of Abraham, is not the God of the philosophers, although, as I tried to work out in my book *The Great High Priest*, a great deal of Plato, via Pythagoras, does seem to have come from the temple.

Given my pro-temple stance and my love of gardening, I regard these philosophical accretions as a form of intellectual bindweed, with very deep roots and very difficult to eradicate. Left unchecked, it strangles and kills the other plants. It has to be removed. A similar culling may be necessary if we are ever to recover the original glory and meaning of Christian worship, to see again the original vision. Everything else will become Church history or history of scholarship.

Christian history cannot be undone or rewritten, but there is the possibility of - dare I say it?- another reformation, when we free ourselves from the accumulated clutter of academe, be this Greek philosophy or German literary criticism, and begin to see again what has been with us all the time in our ancient patterns of worship.

Laurence uses some powerful words when expounding Ascensiontide: ‘...when we have been made ready by the grace given in the liturgical signs to understand the full meaning of what we have... already been given’ (p.107). This applies, I suspect, to our whole liturgical heritage.

Eight minutes, I was told, so I can say no more. Except, perhaps, one of my favourite quotations from Bulgakov¹, originally written of the Holy Wisdom, but applicable, I think to a good deal more:

All this wealth of symbolism has been preserved in the archives of ecclesiastical antiquities, but, covered by the dust of ages, it has been no use to anyone. The time has come, however, for us to sweep away the dust of ages and to decipher the sacred script, to reinstate the tradition of the Church, in this case all but broken, as a living tradition.’

¹ ‘The Wisdom of God’ (1937) reprinted in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, edd. J Pain and N Zernov, London: SPCK, 1976, pp. 144-56, p. 146.