

The Messiah of the Gospels
Charles Augustus Briggs

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The Presbyterian and Reformed Review 7:718-724. [1896]

These two volumes form a sequel to the author's *Messianic Prophecy* published in 1886. Dr. Briggs tells us that this publication marks his return to the more important and profitable task of scholarly research which was interrupted by the ecclesiastical struggle connected with the revision movement and his own well-known trial. That the books have not suffered from this abandonment of the polemic style will be realized on a comparison of their comparatively moderate contents with certain statements in the Preface, in which the heat of the controversial period still seems to linger. For example, after affirming that the proportions of the faith of the Apostles' Creed have been destroyed in most of the modern systems of dogmatic theology, Dr. Briggs goes on to remark:

"The Christian Church of Western Europe, under the influence of the Augustinian theology, has been looking backward and downward instead of upward and forward. In the doctrine of God it has been grubbing in the eternal decree. In the doctrine of man it has been dissecting the corpse of the first Adam and searching for the germs of the disease of original sin which slew him and all our race. Accordingly, religion has been sad, gloomy and sour. In the doctrine of Christ it has been living in Passion week, following the stations of the cross, and bowing in penitence before the crucifix."

And again:

"The author has done his best to turn away from the Christ of the theologians and of the Creeds and of the Church, and to see the Messiah as He is set forth in the writings of the Apostles."

Such wholesale condemnation of historic Christianity we have long been accustomed to from certain quarters where the contempt of so-called tradition is equaled by the lack of historic information, but in the case of a scholar and student of history like Dr. Briggs it is inexcusable and can be explained only by a relapse into the tone of 1889 and 1892, brought on perhaps by the historical retrospect to which the Preface gave occasion.

The author's purpose in these volumes is to show how far the Messianic ideal "has been fulfilled by the first advent of the Messiah, and how far it remained unfulfilled and was taken up into New Testament prophecy and carried on to a higher state of development." This limits the discussion on both sides. On the one hand it excludes all material not strictly connected with the Messianic idea, and on the other hand it approaches the Messianic elements with chief regard to the question what in them is fulfillment of the old or development of something new. It seems to us that the contents of both volumes would have gained in value if the author had adhered more closely to these distinct points of view. To some extent the fault may lie not so much with the treatment as with the undefined character of the subject selected. The Messianic idea so largely pervades the whole of the New Testament writings that it scarcely admits of being detached from the surrounding material. Cognate problems will constantly have to be drawn into the discussion in order to exhibit its full

significance. But in dealing with such related subjects Dr. Briggs gives the impression as if full and adequate treatment lay within his scope. Hence the reader who is at all acquainted with the problems and their ramifications, may find it hard to remove the impression that what the author offers is a rather unsatisfactory substitute for a handbook on New Testament Theology. The result is well adapted to inspire doubt as to the possibility of doing justice to such a large and pervasive subject anywhere else than in a complete treatise on the development of New Testament doctrine.

There is, however, another cause to which we think a certain indistinctness in Dr. Briggs' presentation of his results must be attributed. This is his too exclusively exegetical method. As is well known, Dr. Briggs assigns to Biblical Theology a place in the department of Exegetics. In this we fully agree with him as over against those who would classify it with the branches of Historical Theology. Nevertheless there is a constructive principle in Biblical Theology which should prevent it from becoming or remaining mere classified Exegesis. The gathering of exegetical data should be followed by the grouping of these under well-defined historical conceptions, not indeed to be indiscriminately derived from the sphere of Dogmatic Theology, but from the range of thought of the Biblical writers themselves. These various conceptions should be made to supplement, to interpret and to illumine one another, in order that thus we may reproduce within our own minds the perspective in which the writers saw the truth. If this be neglected we lose ourselves in exegetical details, the various lines of thought remain unconnected, we obtain a catalogue of what was in the author's mind instead of seeing a living vision through his eyes, and, however rich the information imparted, the final effect produced must needs be confusing. There is reason to fear that Dr. Briggs, in his extreme though to some extent justifiable dread of systematizing, has not altogether escaped the peril of thus sacrificing the final aim of all Biblico-theological discussion to an unnecessarily rigid observance of the principle of inductive study. We feel sure that much more could have been made by him out of the labor represented by these volumes, if the interdependence and historic adjustment of New Testament truth in its various parts and stages had been better emphasized.

The author's general theological position is not different from that assumed in his more recent writings. Dr. Briggs speaks of inspiration as a positive fact, but it is an inspiration which does not cover the historical accuracy of the narrative. "The Gospel of Luke seems to have tried the chronological method and to have succeeded only in part." (*Messiah of the Gospels*, p. 73). The songs of the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke are held to have been put in the mouths of the angels, the mothers and the fathers by Christian poets who reflected upon the events commemorated in them. "It could not have been otherwise unless there had been a stenographer or reporter at hand on each occasion, which the circumstances narrated in the context make impossible. Whether the original authors were guided by divine inspiration or not it matters little. If the author of the canonical Luke was inspired, he is responsible for what he used as well as what he composed, and his inspiration covers their selection as appropriate and as sufficiently accurate for the purpose" (*Messiah of the Gospels*, p. 42, Note 4). In view of this, two questions will inevitably arise. First, what justifies us in *including* within the responsibility of an inspired writer the appropriateness and sufficient accuracy of a passage for a definite practical purpose, and in *excluding* from it the correctness of the historical situation in which he has placed it? For it is evident that to Luke's mind the absence of a stenographer or reporter on these occasions did not present any serious difficulty. There can be no doubt that to him Gabriel and Mary, Elizabeth and Zacharias, the angelic host and Simeon, were themselves the Christian poets who produced these songs. And, secondly, we are constrained to ask whether inspiration

with no higher results than to make a writing generally appropriate and sufficiently accurate for its purpose can retain anything of the unique, supernatural character hitherto ascribed to it. There are numerous writings not inspired of which the same attributes may be predicated. We do not mean to say that historical accuracy is the only or even the chief interest guarded by inspiration. There may be other and higher qualities of Scripture equally dependent on it. But the historic credibility of the Bible appears to be one of the few points on which our belief in the divine origin of its contents can be subjected to the concrete test of an apparent conflict with lesser authorities. It represents the point where the struggle inherent in all faith becomes acute. To withdraw here and then to maintain the fact of inspiration in regard to other aspects of Scripture, which by their very nature lie outside the range of such acute conflict, may indeed render our faith invulnerable to the assaults of criticism, but in the same proportion that it does so, will detract from the heroism which is the highest glory of faith, and will create misgivings as to the substantial character of the restricted, intangible, and as it were sublimated inspiration that is left on this view.

In regard to concrete doctrinal results reached by Dr. Briggs, there is much that is commendable in spirit and well expressed as to form. Especially pertinent are the remarks made in several places against the favorite idea of a purely ideal preexistence of Christ imputed to John and Paul. Dr. Briggs pointedly observes that in many of the statements so interpreted the antithesis requires a preexistence with God as real as the post-existence in the glorified state to which they look forward (*Messiah of the Gospels*, pp. 279, 283). On the other hand there are a number of Synoptical statements which do not seem to us to have received their full force. Among these we would count the passages which treat of Jesus' Sonship. In reference to Mark 1:11 and its synoptical parallels, Dr. Briggs says: "We notice that the relation here emphasized is an ethical relation and not a theocratic one;" and quotes with approval Wendt's opinion to the effect that in the conception of the Jews the Messianic king was also "Son of God," whereas, according to the conception of Jesus, the "Son of God" was as such the Messianic king (*Messiah of the Gospels*, p. 77). This idea, we believe, is a thoroughly modern one, and that to Ritschlian scholars like Wendt it possesses great attractions is very natural. But is it actually capable of historic or even historically probable proof that in the consciousness of Jesus the idea of Messianic kingship was posterior to and an inference from the idea of divine sonship in this diluted moral sense? Would not this assumption involve a conflict of the consciousness of Jesus with the Old Testament as well as with the conception of the Jews? We are not aware that the Old Testament ever reduces the divine sonship of the Messiah to this moral minimum. The moral elements are presupposed, but the sonship is anterior to them and wider in compass. If Jesus adopted the term "Son of Man" in its realistic Old Testament sense, is it likely that He emptied the corresponding term "Son of God" of its historical theocratic meaning, to make the latter a mere inference? It seems to us that critical study itself will more and more disclose the unhistorical character of this modern construction of the genesis of Jesus' Messianic consciousness. If Mark 1:2 does make sonship anterior to messiahship, then we are surely forced to the conclusion that it speaks of sonship in the trinitarian sense. Of trinitarian sonship alone can it be said that it is anterior to messianic sonship, and at the same time possesses not a poorer but a richer content than the Old Testament idea of sonship.

In reference to the important passage, Mark 10:45, Dr. Briggs well remarks that it is a comprehensive statement which we should beware of limiting (*Messiah of the Gospels*, p. 112). There is nothing in the words, however, which justify his interpretation of the ransom-giving as including Christ's ministry subsequent to death. The passage rather suggests its culmination and accomplishment in death.

Owing to this too comprehensive view Dr. Briggs finds himself unable to give the saying its natural vicarious sense which lies so much on the surface that Pfeleiderer, for example, here discovers traces of a Pauline influence (*Urchristenthum*, p. 395). "The ransom price," says Dr. Briggs, was not paid to God who claimed no such ransom. . . . It was not paid to the devil, because the devil was not entitled to it and his authority was never recognized by Jesus. It was paid to sin and evil as their ransom price, in order to deliver his disciples from the penalty of sin and evil, which threatened them from the whole order of nature and the whole constitution of human affairs." This reminds us of the exposition of Beyschlag and Wendt, except that the latter explain in what sense Jesus by his ministry and death wrought deliverance from evil and sin, a point which Dr. Briggs leaves in obscurity.

Elsewhere, also, the idea of vicarious sacrifice is but lightly touched upon. Commenting on the words of the institution of the Supper the author maintains that Jesus represents his death as of the nature of a peace-offering. "It is incorrect to think of a sin-offering here, which is of an entirely different class, and where the blood is never applied to persons, but always to altars (*Messiah of the Gospels*, p. 121). This, while true in itself, yet by the way in which it is put places all emphasis on the sprinkling of blood on the persons and passes by in entire silence its application to the altar. Now, as a matter of fact, there is in peace-offerings, as well as in sin-offerings, application of blood to the altars. Dr. Briggs himself correctly observes that the covenant-sacrifice here spoken of is an antithesis to the covenant-sacrifice of Horeb. But at Horeb, according to Ex. 24:6, half of the blood is sprinkled on the altar before the formal conclusion of the covenant. Now, inasmuch as Jesus says that the new covenant is made in his blood, the parallelism with Horeb requires that the principal reference in the words of institution should be precisely to that half of the blood which was sprinkled on the altar, in other words to that feature of the ritual which the peace-offering and sin-offering have in common.

It is in dealing with Paul's Messianic idea that the twofold defect of Dr. Briggs' method mentioned above becomes especially apparent. In the case of a logical mind like Paul's we naturally expect coherent and converging trains of thought. The author's reproduction of the Pauline gospel brings out very little of this character. Its various forms of teaching as set forth by Dr. Briggs may be adjustable, but he has not adjusted them for us. Perhaps a joint treatment of at least the four great Epistles would have, to some extent, prevented this defect. Even in regard to the great fundamentals of Paulinism, so much in debate at present, Dr. Briggs dismisses his readers, all too soon, with a bare reproduction of the Apostle's language, which, closely looked at, says no more than the text says, giving no insight as to the how and why. Thus of the profound and all-important passage, Gal. 2:19-21, we receive but a brief paraphrase. In refuting Dr. Everett's view (*Messiah of the Apostles*, p. 136) and rightly insisting upon the principle that Jesus was crucified because He was accursed and not merely accursed because crucified, Dr. Briggs adds by way of further explanation "Death, Sin and Law, the trinity of evil, exhausted themselves in bringing the curse upon Jesus. In tabooing Him they actually tabooed themselves." What surprises here is the silent detachment of death, sin and law from God, and their elevation to the rank of personal powers, as intimated by the capitals. The traditional view makes the wrath of God against the sinner the higher conception by which the power of sin, law and death is explained, and the vicarious principle of Christ's death the conception by which the abolishment of their power is explained. Now it is in the abstract possible that this traditional view is un-Pauline, and that not the notion of vicariousness but that of abuse of the tabooing power governed the Apostle's thought on this subject. But we are certainly justified in expecting to be told how this principle of self-abolition on the part of sin, law and death stands related to what

Paul elsewhere teaches about God making Christ *sin* for us, or about Christ being the propitiatory besprinkled with blood, or about the connection between God and the trinity of law, sin and death. Can we believe Paul to have held and taught all these ideas without correlating them?

It is interesting to observe that Dr. Briggs makes 2 Cor. 5:1-10 refer to a body given the believer at death distinct from the resurrection-body, in analogy with the twofold state of the body of the Messiah during the mediatorial reign and subsequent to the Parousia. But the silence of this passage concerning the later body and of 1 Cor. 15 concerning the earlier body, is so strange that many writers, among them Pfleiderer, have assumed a change of view on Paul's part between 1 Thess. and 1 Cor. on the one hand and 2 Cor. and Phil. on the other hand. 1 Cor. 15 passes so directly from the earthly body to the resurrection-body of the Parousia that there seems to be no room left for an intermediate body.

A special critical interest attaches to Dr. Briggs' discussion of the apocalyptic portions of the New Testament. A separate chapter is devoted to "The Apocalypse of Jesus." The view that it rests on an originally Jewish or first-Christian apocalypse connected with genuine words of Jesus is rejected. The discussion of this section of the Gospels as a whole is a model of careful and sober exegesis. Whether with the restriction of the phrase "all these things" in Mark 13:30 and parallels to the signs in distinction from the Parousia itself, and with the interpretation of "nigh" in the preceding verse in the wider prophetic sense, the chief difficulties have been removed, we do not venture to decide. Almost one-third of the volume on the Messiah of the Apostles is devoted to a critical dissection of the Apocalypse of John. Dr. Briggs declares himself to have become convinced of the composite character of this book by the arguments of the divisive critics. Nevertheless, he is not satisfied with any of the divisions proposed by Völter, Spitta, Vischer, Weyland, Pfleiderer and others, and proposes one of his own. He finds in the Apocalypse six minor apocalypses, designated as those of the beasts, dragon, trumpets, seals, bowls, epistles. This is also their chronological order. The book passed through four editions. After much wavering, Dr. Briggs decides that the Apostle John was the author of the apocalypses of the epistles, the seals and the bowls. As to the author of the other parts or of the final edition he expresses no opinion. We have not the space at our disposal to enter upon a full discussion of this critical theory. It might be easily criticized as Dr. Briggs himself suggests. The author does not state what arguments of his predecessors in this field have convinced him of the composite nature of the work. Incidentally he mentions lack of symmetry, *e.g.*, the interruption of both the seals and trumpets by episodes in chaps. 7 and 11. But the very fact of the interposition of these episodes in precisely the same place in both series, between the sixth and the seventh seals and trumpets, is in itself a striking evidence of symmetry. Further, inconsistencies of teaching are appealed to, such as the difference between the particularism in chap. 7:1-8 and the universalism of the preceding context of the seals. Hence Dr. Briggs removes these verses from the apocalypse of the seals to that of the trumpets and puts in their stead 14:1-5 where the 144,000 appear in a universalistic character. But how little weight is to be attributed to this assumed discrepancy appears from the fact that Pfleiderer, for example, in turn removes 7:9-17 as too universalistic for the foregoing context of the seals, and only inquires whether the source of the latter be Jewish or Jesus-Christian (*Urchristenthum*, p. 326). Then there are repetitions inconsistent with unity of composition. But Dr. Briggs does not altogether escape these on his own theory. In the apocalypse of the beasts he makes the treading under foot of the holy city by the nations and the forty-two months of the war of the beasts parallel representations of the same event. The chief objection, however, to his proposed division lies in the great number

of editorial interpolations which it forces him to assume. For the frequent instances of evident dependence of one document on the other, the redactor's influence is called into service to explain the similarity. We shall quote only one example. Chap. 14:14-20 belongs, according to Dr. Briggs, to the seventh trumpet and is not connected with the war of the beasts. Chap. 19:11-21 continues the vision of the war with the beasts, and brings it to an appropriate end (*Messiah of the Apostles*, p. 298). And yet these passages strikingly coincide in that they employ the figure of the winepress of the wrath of God. But in a note on p. 386 we are told that 14:19 is probably an explanatory statement of the last editor. The necessity for endless applications of this remedy with no other call for it than that it suits the exigencies of the division, clearly exhibits the interdependence of the various parts of the Apocalypse and furnishes the strongest possible evidence of the unity of its authorship.