

Kohlbrugge's Interpretation of Matthew 1

Matthew I is the genealogy of Jesus. It is the becoming, or the genesis of the Word in the flesh. It relays the history of the fulfilment of the promise of God for the people of God. Matthew I testifies to Jesus' coming in the flesh as the fulfilment of the promise for those who rested in God's Word by faith. It therefore is more properly understood as a faith-genesis.¹

Understanding this chapter as faith-genesis implies that if Jesus is acknowledged to have come in the flesh, it is always connected to how Jesus has come in the flesh for those who believed. This time, in comparison to Kohlbrugge's treatment of Romans 7, where he focused on how the nature and function of the Word of God--and by implication the human being--is understood by Kohlbrugge, the question what it means to believe in the Word is central. This believing too has implications for a human self-understanding. Acknowledging the Word of God fulfilled means for Kohlbrugge a disavowal of all the strength, the art, suspicions, expectations, and honour of the flesh.² Therefore one could say that the fulfilment of the promise, the Word of God having become flesh, shows itself to have the same function as the Word being law and spiritual.³

¹ H. F. Kohlbrugge, *Overdenking van het Eerste Hoofdstuk van het Evangelie van Mattheüs* (Amsterdam: Vereniging tot Uitgave van Gereformeerde Geschriften, 1939) 4.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Loos refers to Lonkhuyzen saying that Kohlbrugge's interpretation of Matthew I is an 'image' of his commentary of Romans 7. J. Loos, *De Theologie van Kohlbrugge* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverijmaatschappij, 1948) 50. The similarity lies in the stress on the 'fleshness' of the human being. Cf. Herman Klugkist Hesse, *Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrügge* trans. J van Den Haar (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij Van den Berg, 1980) 184. And D.Kalmijn, in Dr. W. Aalders et. al *Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrugge (1803-1875) Zijn Leven, Zijn prediking, Zijn Geschriften* (Den Haag: J.N. Voorhoeve, 1976) 90-91.

The question then is, how is flesh to be perceived in light of God's Word as promise to be fulfilled? Or in other words, *how* did Jesus Christ come in the flesh to redeem it from its sinfulness? From the genealogy of Jesus it is then shown that the Word became flesh as an annulment of that which manifested itself as flesh. In becoming flesh in this way God remained God. This is the comfort of believers who understand themselves to be nothing but carnally sold under sin.

Kohlbrugge emphasizes that the genealogy in Matthew testifies to a becoming of Jesus in the flesh. It testifies to how Jesus came, has come, and is coming in the flesh for those who are by faith in the Word.⁴

It must be kept in mind that Levi wrote this genealogy. Levi was the sinner who knew by experience what it was to acknowledge that Jesus came also in *his* flesh. To him, the tax collector, the traitor of his nation, grace had come! Not as half-holy or godly, but as a traitor, a sinner from head to toe. That is how Jesus came in the flesh. And Levi in this way saw that Jesus was the Messiah out of the house of David. This was the faith-genealogy of Jesus in Levi's flesh, and so he wrote this genealogy.⁵

Matthew begins with "Jesus Christ a son of David." Kohlbrugge comments, "continually *per desperata*." There was not a king, anointed of God, so attacked from all sides. And yet he was the man after God's heart, the king of the promise. This is how Jesus Christ was proclaimed King; he was proclaimed King on the cross.⁶ Faith in the promise is faith in God's fulfilment of the promises in the midst of human impossibilities, contradictions, and helplessness.

⁴ H. F. Kohlbrugge, *Overdenking van het Eerste Hoofdstuk van het Evangelie van Mattheüs, 1*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3 (see note 4).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

In the following I will illustrate how Kohlbrugge sees the Word becoming flesh in reference to specific examples from the genealogy of Jesus.

“And Abraham begat Isaac.” What a history! For Sarah the case became laughable (Gen 18: 11-12), and yet the promise came. Then after it Abraham “had to go the road to Moria” to sacrifice his son. This is *how* the genesis began.⁷

“And Jacob begat Judah.” Judah was born in the way of Leah’s desperation for being loved and recognized. Precisely at that point she gave it over to God. Judah means, ‘this time I will praise the Lord.’ With the first three sons she had hoped to win Jacob’s favour. The names of the first three sons reflect her expectations. She had sought to secure her acceptance of Jacob *by fleshly means*, but to no avail. Having come to the end of herself, with the fourth son she praised God. And so she fell into God’s arms, not Jacob’s. Jacob by the Spirit had to recognize this and blessed Judah as the one who would be praised by his brethren.⁸ In this way, the Word became flesh, God was left to be God and it was testified to by the Spirit through Jacob.

Kohlbrugge deals with the story of Tamar in a surprising way. By playing the harlot, Tamar begets Jesus Christ according to the promise. She gives up her status and honour as a sinner and so realizes the promise of God. God did not spare any flesh. That which is born out of God is holy and in light of that, flesh needs to be acknowledged as flesh, unholy and ungodly.⁹

But the history of Tamar goes on. Not only in the way she conceived the child did she show what flesh was, but also in the way she thought and proved to be who she was

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 16-17.

as flesh. Just like Eve before her, she thought the first born to be the inheritor of the promise. But unexpectedly the designated second-born broke through. This Tamar thought to be wrong and not according to her tradition and calculation. God thought it right: out of the second child Christ was born.

In this context Kohlbrugge alludes to Paul's assertion that he too found this law in him: "For the good that I will to do, I do not; but the evil I will not, that I practice" (Rom. 7:19 NKJV).¹⁰ Time and time again the human being has to be shown that God does not save flesh. He condemns it and shows it to be condemned, so that He will remain God who has the Image in which fleshly human beings can take refuge and rest. Everyone who is born out of God by his Spirit can be one with Tamar the prostitute.¹¹

Interpreting the Word of God requires the implicit experience of it. Without that experience one always seeks to interpret according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit! The latter Kohlbrugge observes with reference to Rahab. She was a heathen harlot. Many attempt to interpret the Hebrew word for harlot as innkeeper. However, this merely shows that such interpreters desire to save Rahab's honour and portray her as a quasi-holy person.¹² Kohlbrugge proves that all other occurrences of this word in Scripture, in Aramaic, Arabic, and Persian, refer to someone being a harlot. In this context Kohlbrugge speaks of Pythagorism and Christian Platonism, viewpoints which according to him have not understood the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ and thereby show the truth of Romans 1: 25-32.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹¹ Ibid., 17, 20.

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

In the history of David the king, Kohlbrugge observes the Word of God as being David's son and David's Lord. Jesus is David's son according to lineage. *How* he is David's son is, however, more important to the believer. He is David's son as Lord, that is, as the One who David could not be: eternal and holy. Precisely as Lord over that which is utterly human, Christ was David's son. Christ was and is God's Word in which David too existed in all his bitterness and anxiety. As such he existed in Christ believing that, which was still to come, yet already there in the promise. Here Kohlbrugge alludes to Paul's exclamation, "I live, but no more I, but Christ lives in me."¹⁴ And so David's kingship existed in the Word of God.

David manifested himself to be merely flesh indeed. He became a murderer and an adulterer. He gave up his relationship with God for immediate gratification of the flesh and remained in this condition until God showed him who he was. Here David was in a state of being-without-God, tied to a woman in sin. Kohlbrugge points to the saying: *nomino mutato, de te cantatur fabula*, meaning, "O human, who art thou, here thou hast thine own history."¹⁵ In this way God's grace is to be seen and magnified. Christ took on such flesh and remained true to His own word, and was born out of this relationship.

Kohlbrugge's exclamation, "O human being who art thou, here thou hast thine own history," shows that he seeks to emphasize the importance of an experiential, historical realization of the Word becoming flesh in the application of the Word of God. Christ needs to come in our flesh as determined by the truth of Scripture. The Word of God is therefore to be taken as historical testimony to the truth established from eternity. In the believer, therefore, there needs to be experience, historically and spiritually

¹⁴ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

corresponding to that which comes to him or her in the Word of God. In this way God is left to be God in all the aspects of His being, and the human being is left to be human being in all the aspects of his or her sinful existence. In Christ, God's being is spoken to and vindicated historically, so that the believer can again be with God in His Word and Spirit; now on this side of the grave, in suffering and the cross, then, through death, in eternal bliss and love.