

# Begg, James Aiton (1800–1868)

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James Aiton Begg was a Sabbatarian in Scotland who believed in Christ's soon return. He came to this conviction in the late 1820s and rose to prominence in the 1830s and 1840s. He was a bookseller, stationer, and author.<sup>1</sup> After 1845 he was affiliated with the Seventh Day Baptist denomination. In 1853 he was baptized as a Seventh Day Baptist and became a regular contributor to the *Sabbath Recorder*.

## Early Life

James Begg was born in 1800 in Paisley near Glasgow, Scotland, to John (1771-1847) and Jane (1776-1829) Begg (née Aiton).<sup>2</sup> His father was a teacher and made sure James received a liberal education. James was apprenticed to the printing trade. He subsequently became a bookseller and stationer.<sup>3</sup> On November 28, 1823, he married Bethia Isabella Elizabeth Martin (1804-1862), and the couple had three children together. After her passing, he remarried the widow Ruth Hunderson (1809-1870) on January 7, 1839. She had previously been married to Hugh McLean (1798-1837) with whom she had three children. Together they would have five more children of their own.

## Involvement in an Advent Movement

In his early years, Begg was a member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland.<sup>4</sup> As a youth, to help a friend who was agitated about the Second Coming of Christ, he investigated the matter:

It was a view to put this friend's mind right and at rest that he entered upon a scriptural examination for the doctrine of the advent. Contrary to his expectation, after serious, carefully investigation and prayerful study of the Bible, he was led to adopt as a scriptural truth the pre-millennial advent of the Lord. Further research and reading, with no small amount of controversy with ministers of the Gospel and other readers of the Bible, resulted in his publishing, in 1829 (now forty years ago), *A Connected View of Some of the Scriptural Evidences*..<sup>5</sup>

A sense of urgency intensified in late 1831 and 1832, as a global cholera pandemic spread across Scotland. Begg interpreted the outbreak of deadly disease as a sign of God's "divine displeasure" that should spur people to

"greater holiness" and supplication.<sup>6</sup> Already an ardent premillennialist, this pandemic prompted several more editions of what would become his most widely circulated work, *A Connected View of Some of the Scriptural Evidences of the Redeemer's Speedy Personal Return*. Begg emphasized his belief that Israel's Jews would return to their own land and Christ would reign in Jerusalem for 365,000 years. Furthermore, the Man of Sin would be destroyed by the premillennial advent. He also argued that the saints would be resurrected first, then there would be a brief apostasy following the millennium, and finally there would be a general resurrection and judgment. Begg especially focused in his writing on the Little Horn as the papal Antichrist, upon whom "tremendous judgements" would happen. He stressed the literal restoration of Israel and the overthrow of Turkey. He interpreted "spiritism" [spiritualism], as a sign of the end.

During the pandemic Begg expounded upon Matthew 24 in the form of a series of *Letters to a Minister of the Gospel* (1831). He further explained his eschatological views:

Sanctioned though they have been by men of superior discernment and Christian attainments, the Expositions now generally offered of the Saviour's prediction of his coming seem destitute of all that should command the submission of a faithful and intelligent inquirer.... Let not those whose faith is thus impugned seek to put away from them the imputation, till able to satisfy themselves, at least, of its being unfounded; but, as they would value their Lord's approbation, let them receive from His mouth a knowledge of the time of his glorious return, and yield to his intimations that implicit submission which the sacredness of his character imperiously demands.<sup>7</sup>

Begg noted the "growing importance" of study "in favour of the premillennial Personal Advent" of Christ.<sup>8</sup> As such he is the earliest known person to use the term "premillennial" as part of an apocalyptic revival.<sup>9</sup> In his Bible study, Begg was known for giving equal weight to the Old Testament and the New Testament. The notion that the New Testament superseded the Old, he viewed "as an error to be opposed" and "guarded against." After all, he believed that "all" of the Bible was "equally the inspired Word of the living God."<sup>10</sup> In 1832 he adopted the seventh-day Sabbath, a practice he kept for the rest of his life. His obituary states that he adopted this practice from personal Bible study.<sup>11</sup> He had previously adopted baptism of adult believers by immersion (as opposed to infant baptism), following Christ's example in the gospels.<sup>12</sup>

Begg was known for his passion for studying Bible prophecy, especially the books of Isaiah, Daniel, and Revelation. His friends remembered that while giving a lecture on Revelation, he stated: "I can say in truth, I have studied every page of that book upon my knees."<sup>13</sup> He contended that Britain was one of the ten toes of Daniel 2 and the ten horns of Daniel 7.<sup>14</sup> According to Begg, at the close of the 2300 days or years next would come the "mighty year of God's glory."<sup>15</sup> The special object of visitation during the sixth vial of Daniel 11 was the Ottoman Empire (Turkey). Begg wrote that "Daniel, in predicting the final overthrow of the Ottoman power, (this application being generally admitted, we stop not to notice the grounds on which it is made,) foretold that '*tidings out of THE EAST and out of THE NORTH shall trouble him.*' Dan. Xi. 44."<sup>16</sup>

Begg was the first British millenarian to communicate with the American Millerites sharing his convictions. This in turn made American Millerites aware of a larger movement of Europeans who believed in the literal premillennial Second Advent of Christ and eagerly awaited the eschaton. He sparked an exchange of correspondence and publications, as early as 1840, sensitizing Joshua V. Himes and other Second Advent ministers in America to these spiritual cousins. Himes planned to travel to Europe, but this trip never materialized. This exchange also sensitized Millerites to English publications on the Second Advent, including Edward Irving's 1827 translation of Manuel Lacunza's 1824 book on the prophecies, and the prophetic conferences that had taken place on Henry Drummond's estate. Ellen White's rendition of church history in her classic work, *The Great Controversy*, included the story of this global Advent movement and particularly highlighted the role of Joseph Wolff, Henry Drummond's son-in-law. In the subsequent exchange of correspondence, Begg offered to send the editor of the Millerite periodical, *The Midnight Cry*, a series of articles about the seventh-day Sabbath. His offer was declined.<sup>17</sup>

On April 1, 1845, Begg began corresponding with American Seventh Day Baptists, and he eventually joined their denomination.<sup>18</sup> On November 13, 1845, he published the first in a series of articles "The Original Sabbath Unchanged" in *The Sabbath Recorder*.<sup>19</sup> He was baptized by Joseph W. Morton on July 7, 1853.

## Final Years and Legacy

Begg remained active in sharing his faith about the Second Coming of Christ and the seventh-day Sabbath for the rest of his life. Begg died on November 25, 1868.<sup>20</sup> In his later years, he was known for giving lectures on geology, creation, and Noah's flood.<sup>21</sup> From noted that Begg eventually drifted toward a Futurist view of an individual antichrist yet to come.<sup>22</sup> According to William Anderson, Begg's proclamation of "the truth of the kingdom" was influential in awakening interest in Christ's return in western Scotland.<sup>23</sup> At his memorial, William Fulton characterized him as "a man of prayer as well as of deep [Bible] study."<sup>24</sup>

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## NOTES

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5. *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.
6. James A. Begg, *The True Cause of the Prevalence of Pestilence, and Other Judgments of God; with the Divinely Appointed Means of Deliverance and Safety* (Paisley: Alex Gardner, 1832), 3-4.
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8. *Ibid.*, vi.
9. I am indebted to Kevin M. Burton for pointing out this detail. Cf. James A. Begg, *A Connected View of Some of the Scriptural Evidence of the Redeemer's Speedy Personal Return, and Reign on Earth with His Glorified Saints, During the Millennium: Israel's Restoration to Palestine: and the Destruction of Antichristian Nations: With Remarks on Various Authors Who Oppose These Doctrines* (New York: John Moffet, 1842), 83, 88, 89, 136, 168.
10. Begg, *Summary of Doctrines Taught in Christian Meeting-house*, ix.
11. LeRoy Edwin Froom, "Rediscovering the Sabbath Truth," *ARH*, September 16, 1948, 7.
12. Begg, *Summary of Doctrines Taught in Christian Meeting-house*, xi.
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14. Froom, *Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*, vol. 4, 940.

15. Begg, *A Connected View*, 232.
16. *Ibid.*, 246.
17. "For myself, I must be allowed to say, that the little leisure which my business allows for the more congenial occupation of authorship, I require in the meantime for a work on the continued obligation of the *Seventh Day*, as the Christian Sabbath, which I am preparing for the press. If acceptable, I would, however, be glad to furnish you with notes of a course of Lectures on Prophetic Subjects, which I have delivered here." James A. Begg, Letter dated Jan. 28, 1840 [1841?], *Signs of the Times*, April 1, 1841, 3.
18. James A. Begg, "Letter to [George B. Utter] editor," *The Sabbath Recorder* (New-York), May 1, 1845, 561.
19. *The Sabbath Recorder*, vol. 2, no. 21, cited by Froom, *Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*, vol. 3, 561.
20. <http://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/tools/tree/189301824/invitees/accept?inviteId=b13ebcd4-8e80-499a-abad-b6d44db8a644> [accessed 2/20/23].
21. See public notice advertising James A. Begg's lectures on "Christian Geology" in *Glasgow Herald*, January 4, 1867, 2.
22. Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 3, 561.
23. William Anderson, *An Apology for Millennial Doctrine: In the Form in Which It Was Entertained by the Primitive Church*, etc. (London: James Nisbet, 1830), 63, see note.
24. Begg, *Summary of Doctrines Taught in Christian Meeting-house*, viii.

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