

MIND ON FIRE: THE LIFE OF JACOB BOEHME

by Wayne Kraus

“His bodily appearance was somewhat mean; he was of small stature, had a low forehead but prominent temples, a rather aquiline nose, a scanty beard, grey eyes sparkling into heavenly blue, a feeble but genial voice. He was modest in his bearing, lowly in conduct, patient in suffering and gentle-hearted.” (Frankenberg)

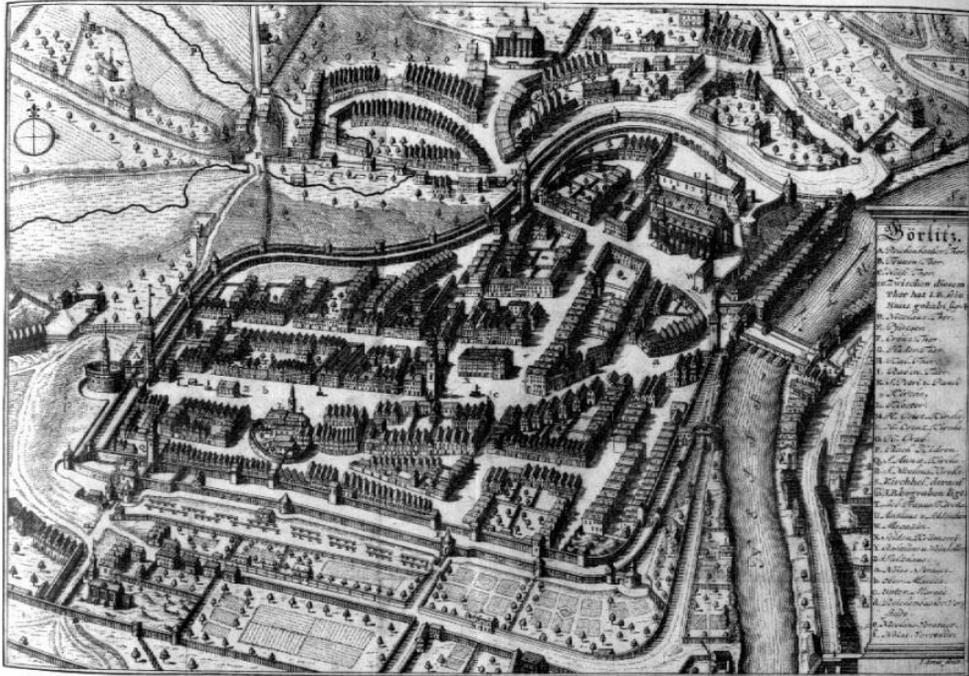
Any biography of the Teutonic Theosopher must be a brief one, since there is little to tell about his outward life, though the productions of his inward life extend to many volumes. He was naturally meek, self-effacing and reflective. He lived the quiet life of a pious tradesman until the contents of his volcanic mind irresistibly spilled over into the larger world, bringing him unwanted notoriety and adventure.

The best-known stories of his life are from the biography by his good friend Abraham von Frankenberg. Frankenberg tells of a childhood visitation from a divine messenger, the discovery of a hidden treasure which later vanished, the "pewter dish" Illumination, as well as JB's miracle-working power, clairvoyance and ability to speak "all 72 languages." And though none of this is mentioned in his own writings, it is interesting that, three centuries before the Pentecostals, JB insisted that the *charismata* (miraculous gifts of the Spirit) were *not* withdrawn from the church at the end of the Apostolic Age, as all Protestants believed, but that the Holy Spirit still granted the gifts of healing, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues and prophecy.

He was born in 1575, probably on April 24th, at the village of Alt Seidenberg in Upper Lusatia, a mile from the city of Gorlitz. The name Boehme probably derives from nearby Bohemia. Though the village was poor, it had a schoolhouse where Jacob received a basic education. His father was a peasant landowner, an elder in the church, and had enough financial wherewithal to apprentice his son to a shoemaker. In 1599 he became a master cobbler, joined the Guild, married a godly woman and bought a house in Gorlitz, where he became a prosperous tradesman.



Boehme's Home & Workshop



Gortitz c. 1600



Study

In 1600, Martin Moller became Primate (Head Pastor) of Gortitz and founded a fraternity called “the Brotherhood of God’s True Servants,” of which Boehme became a member. This was his introduction to the movement known as Pietism. At a time when Reformation theology had ossified into dead dogma, and “saving faith” had been redefined as “correct doctrinal opinion,” the Pietists emphasized an inward experience of Jesus Christ and holiness in daily living. They understood salvation as *regeneration* rather than mere *justification*.

As a mystic who admired the writings of Tauler, a Kempis, Ruysbroeck, Suso and Bernard of Claveaux, Moller ran afoul of church authority, but under his preaching revival broke out in Gortitz. Many were converted, and Jacob Boehme was awakened.

When in my resolved zeal I gave so hard an assault, storm, and onset upon God and upon all the gates of hell, as if I had more reserves of virtue and power ready, with a resolution to hazard my life upon it (which assuredly were not in my ability without the assistance of the Spirit of God), suddenly my spirit did break through the gates of hell, even into the innermost moving of the Deity, and there I was embraced in love as a bridegroom embraces his dearly beloved bride.

The greatness of the triumphing that was in my spirit I cannot express either in speaking or writing; neither can it be compared to any thing but that wherein life is generated in the midst of death. It is like the resurrection from the dead.

In this light my spirit suddenly saw through all, and in and by all, the creatures; even in herbs and grass it knew God, who he is and how he is and what his will is. And suddenly in that light my will was set on by a mighty impulse to describe the Being of God.

But because I could not presently apprehend the deepest movings of God and comprehend them in my reason, there passed almost twelve years before the exact understanding thereof was given me.

Then Boehme began his first book, *Aurora*.

In the summer of 1612 he lent the still-unfinished *Aurora* to a nobleman named Karl von Endern who, without the author's knowledge, had the book unbound and copied. Thus, unbeknownst to Boehme, his book began to circulate and his name came to be known among the intellectuals of Lusatia, Bohemia and Silesia.

Moller had died in 1606 while under investigation on suspicions that he was a crypto-Calvinist. The church hierarchy replaced him with a rock-ribbed Lutheran loyalist: Gregorius Richter, an imperious, worldly ecclesiastic of low intelligence and foul disposition who referred to the pulpit as his "Council-Throne" and who became Boehme's chief persecutor. A copy of *Aurora* fell into the hands of Richter, who characteristically flew into a rage. He denounced "the shoemaker" from the pulpit and demanded that the City Council expel Boehme from Gorlitz, lest God cause the ground to open up and swallow the whole town. Next day JB was summoned before the Council, who found no fault in him. Nevertheless, intimidated by the powerful cleric, they banished Boehme from Gorlitz. He was not even allowed to stop and say goodbye to his family, but forced to walk straight from the courthouse to the city gates. He wandered the fields alone all day and spent the night no one knows where.

The Council must not have slept well that night, for next morning they repented and invited Boehme to return. They urged him "out of love for the city's quiet" to hand his book over to Richter for immolation and desist from writing any more books. To this he agreed.

He applied himself to his trade and did not write again for seven years. He was heckled by children and louts in the street and rocks were thrown through his windows, but the persecution only increased his fame and curiosity about his book! Scholars and noblemen made pilgrimages

to his house, sometimes staying for weeks. His learned friends persistently urged him to ignore the Council's decree and take up his pen again. He was understandably reluctant to comply.

I saw this first book no more in three years; I supposed that it was dead and gone, till certain learned men sent me some copies of it, who exhorted me to proceed, and manifest my talent, to which the *outward reason* would by no means agree, because it had suffered so much already for it; moreover, the spirit of *reason* was very weak and timorous, for my high light was for a good while also withdrawn from me, and it did glow in me as a hidden fire; so that I felt nothing but anguish and perplexity within me; outwardly I found contempt, and inwardly a fiery instigation; yet I was not able to comprehend [that light] till the breath of the Most High did help me to it again, and awakened new life in me, and then I obtained a better style in writing, also deeper and more grounded knowledge: I could bring everything better into the outward expression; which the book, treating of the threefold life through the three principles, doth demonstrate; and the godly reader, whose heart is opened, shall see.

When Upper Lusatia came under the government of Bohemia, he felt free from the restrictions imposed by the City of Gorlitz, and began to write again. From 1619 till his death in 1624 he produced a huge corpus of literature. The meridian light of *Aurora* had risen to the noonday sun of revelation seen in *The Three Principles of the Divine Essence*, *The Threefold Life of Man*, *The Incarnation of Christ*, *Forty Questions of the Soul*, *The Signature of All Things*, *Mysterium Magnum* and dozens of shorter books, tractates and epistles.

Thus now I have written, not from the instruction or knowledge received from men, nor from the learning or reading of books; but I have written out of my own book which was opened in me, being the noble similitude of God, the book of the noble and precious image (understand God's own similitude or likeness) was bestowed upon me to read; and therein I have studied, as a child in the house of its mother, which beholdeth what the father doth, and in his child-like play doth imitate his father; I have no need of any other book.

My book hath only three leaves, the same are the three principles of eternity, wherein I can find all whatsoever Moses and the prophets, Christ and his apostles have taught and spoken; I can find therein the foundation of the world and all mysteries; yet not I, but the spirit of God, doth it according to the measure, as He pleaseth.

Jacob Boehme was no cloistered mystic. He was a healthy and active man, fully engaged with the workaday world. He was a prominent member of the Shoemakers Guild, and when local tanners began to afflict shoemakers with price-gouging and other unsavory business practices, Jacob hatched a plot to acquire "beef-skins" from abroad, which he bought in bulk, tanned himself and sold to other shoemakers at friendly prices. This brought a lawsuit from the Tanners Guild. Jacob and a colleague were jailed for Slander when they called a tanner named Matz Roehricht a "scoundrel," but were soon released when a magistrate determined that the plaintiff was, in fact, a scoundrel, and jailed Roehricht "on account of unreasonable sales." The Tanners Guild lost the lawsuit, and there is an entry in the Gorlitz city records, in what looks like Jacob's handwriting, thanking God for giving the victory to the shoemakers. But Jacob was fined and ordered to forgo his tanning racket. Later he paid a larger fine for the "black market trading" of

textiles. (It is not that his business ethics were remiss: in the chaos of the dissipating Holy Roman Empire, with its 224 German States and many-tiered Trade Laws, it was up to the Merchant to decide *whose* Trade Laws to follow, since it was impossible to keep Imperial, State, Municipal and Guild laws all at once!)

City records show that Jacob borrowed much, bought much and moved large amounts of money. His investments in real estate, leather and textiles made him prosperous enough that in 1612, at the age of 36, he was able to sell his cobbler's bench and leave shoe-making behind him. He placed all four of his sons in a trade, cared for an orphaned niece and kept up a voluminous correspondence with his many adherents and inquirers. When the Thirty Years War brought economic crisis to the region, he made ends meet by buying woolen gloves in the country and selling them in Prague and Dresden, travelling dangerous roads thru war-torn lands without fear, and without incident. He remained a busy man of affairs even while in the throes of divine ecstasy and when his fierce inspirations kept him writing deep into the night.

There is always a certain disappointment when we dig deep into the "Lives of the Saints," and go beyond the glowing narratives of hagiographers. We find that our Heroes of the Faith did not walk on water, after all. Jacob dealt with the same everyday difficulty, tedium, worry and silliness that we do, yet lived in the Light of God, and saw transcendent meaning in everything, even while stitching shoes and fitting customers in his cobbler's shop. There was for him no compartmentalization of sacred and profane, religious and secular. His mind dwelt in the Second Principle (the light world) while his feet were planted firmly in the Third Principle (the material world). "Gnostic" is a better descriptor for such a life than "mystic." A mystic contemplates; a Gnostic perceives, and does not require great leisure for contemplation. The Mystic's life of quietude and contemplation is far better spent than most, but is not available to those who work, pay bills, manage homes and raise children. Few of the great mystics of the past had families and day jobs. JB shows us that one can live a sort of "active-contemplative" life. His books say nothing about meditative practices; they say much about the right state of mind for living in the "Sunrise to Eternity," especially in *The Supersensual Life*.

When thou standest still from the Thinking of Self, and the Willing of Self; when both thy Intellect and Will are quiet and passive to the Impressions of the Eternal Word and Spirit; when thy Soul is winged up, and above that which is temporal with the outward Senses and the Imagination being locked up by Holy Abstraction; then the Eternal Hearing, Seeing, and Speaking will be revealed IN THEE; and so God heareth and seeth through thee, being now the Organ of His Spirit; and so God speaketh in thee, and whispereth to thy Spirit, and thy Spirit heareth his Voice. Blessed art thou therefore if that thou canst stand still from Self-Thinking and Self-Willing, and canst stop the Wheel of thy Imagination and Senses; for it is hereby that thou mayest arrive at Length to see the great Salvation of God, being made capable of all Manner of Divine Sensations and Heavenly Communications. Since it is nought indeed but thine OWN Hearing and Willing that do hinder thee, so that thou dost not see and hear God.

Brother Lawrence learned the Practice of the Presence of God, not in a quiet sanctuary, but in a noisy kitchen. William Blake, a busy artisan who lived in the boisterous working class districts

of London, could "see a world in a grain of sand & a heaven in a wildflower." There was no ascetic self-mastery or strenuous spiritual practice for Blake:

God is with me night & day

And he never turns his face away

I believe that JB wrote so prodigiously because, like Blake, he perceived the Light most clearly when he was engaged in the creative act of writing.

His books were hand-copied and circulated discreetly so as not to draw further attention from the religious authorities. But in 1623 von Frankenberg published a print edition of two tractates under the title *The Way to Christ*. Gregorius Richter, now in the last stage of chronic alcoholism, published a violent pasquillo against Boehme, the contents of which demonstrate the ruination of the Primate's mind. It begins with an awful Latin poem and proceeds with a string of invective that sounds like a parody of Luther:

“As many lines as there are, as many Blasphemies against God, are to be found in the Shoemaker’s Book: which stinks abominably of Shoemakers Pitch and Blacking; fy, fy, let this stink be far from us...O Christ! the Holy Spirit hath anointed thee with Oil, more than thy fellows, and hath made thee a Priest. But the Shoemaker, the Devil hath defiled thee with Dirt, and Dung, and made thee a Heretic...The shoemaker is the Antichrist...Thy filth O Shoemaker, hath exceedingly defiled OUR City. O that all those who read thy writings, might away along with thee into Perdition. O, now then begone, and come no more, that thou mayest miserably perish, and rather take a Shoe into thy hand, than a PEN.”

In a case of what Jung called "projection," Richter repeatedly accused Boehme of being a drunkard: "CHRIST scarce drank any wine, but the Shoemaker guzzleth freely, Outlandish wine, and Brandy-wine...the Shoemaker runneth every Morning, to the Brandy-wine or Strong-water."

The Shoemaker replied, "Spanish wine causeth that Men sometimes want or lose the Primate for a while, also men may see by the red Wine-pimples in his Face that he drinketh strong Wine much more than I, for I have no such sign of it as he; he drinks more foreign Wine in a week than I in a year....Men use sometime to take him from lying drunk under Tables, abroad, and bring him Home: Men may indeed find him oft drunk in one week, but the Shoemaker not in Three years."

The Shoemaker was again summoned before the Council, who, not as apt to the Primate's hand as they once were, handed down no punishments but warned JB that he might be tried for heresy by the Prince Elector and advised him to flee the country. He was offered a safe haven at the Electoral Court in Dresden, where he was examined by a panel of theologians and scientists, who pronounced him "a man of marvelously high mental gifts, who at present can be neither condemned nor approved."

On August 14th, 1624, Richter died. Yet JB's family continued to suffer persecution in Gorlitz, and he began arranging to bring them to Dresden, where he now enjoyed the friendship of the nobility and the protection of the Prince Elector of Silesia. His star was rising among the German intelligentsia and plans were laid to put all his books in print.

While staying at the house of a nobleman in Silesia, Jacob contracted a high fever and then developed a gastric ailment, possibly as a result of drinking too much cold water. He was brought back to Gorlitz where he languished for two weeks. We will let Hans Martensen tell the end of the story:

He awaited death with composure. On Sunday, November 21st, shortly after midnight, or early in the morning, he called his son Tobias, and asked him if he did not hear that sweet and harmonious music. As Tobias heard nothing, he begged him to open the door that he might better hear it; then he asked what was the hour, and when he was told that it had just struck two, he said: "My time is not yet; three hours hence is my time." After some silence he exclaimed: "Oh, thou strong God of Sabaoth, deliver me according to thy will!" and, immediately afterwards: "Thou crucified Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me, and take me to thyself and thy kingdom!" A little later, he gave instructions where some of his manuscripts would be found, and expressed hope that the noble friend whom he had visited in Silesia would provide for his widow, but also assured her that she must speedily follow him (as indeed took place, for she died of the plague in the very next year). At six in the morning, he suddenly bade them farewell with a smile, and said, "Now I go hence into Paradise."

His body remained unburied for several days while the family battled local religious authorities, who were reluctant to give a Christian burial to a heretic. They were forced to comply under orders of the powerful Catholic Count Hannibal von Drohna.

Friends provided an elaborately carved wooden cross for his grave (see image below) but it stood only a few days before it was destroyed by vandals.

Gregorius Richter Jr. became a famous hymn writer and one of Jacob Boehme's most enthusiastic advocates, publishing several volumes of his writings. In the preface to the first volume he wrote, "O my father, what have you done?"

On April 24, 1924, a statue of Jacob Boehme was unveiled in Gorlitz and a new stone placed on his grave.

Also see

[THE LIFE AND DEATH OF JACOB BOEHME](#) by Abraham von Frankenberg

[THE LIFE AND DOCTRINE OF JACOB BOEHME](#) by Franz Hartmann

