

MIND ON FIRE: THE LIFE OF JACOB BOEHME

by Wayne Kraus

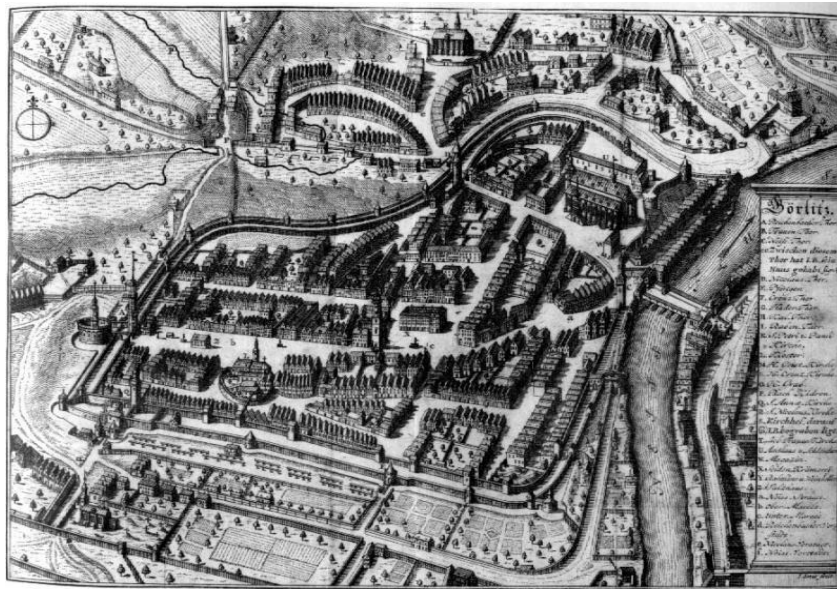
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"His bodily Presence was mean, his Stature small, his Forehead low, his Temples prominent, his Nose aquiline, his Eyes grey and rather of an Azure-Cast, bright and clear, like the Windows of Solomon's Temple; his Beard was short and thin; And altho' the Tone of his Voice was low, yet he was mild and affable in his Discourse; modest in his Deportment, discreet and judicious in his Words, humble in his Walk and Conversation, patient in Sufferings; also meek and lowly in Heart: His Spirit, so highly illuminated of God beyond any Thing Nature could produce, and his extremely pure and very intelligible Style, according to the highest and best German Standard, are left to the Reader's Sagacity to examine and recognize in the divine Light, by these his unsophisticated Writings."
(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 spilled over into the wider 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, who tells of a childhood visitation from a divine messenger, the discovery of a hidden treasure which later vanished and the "pewter dish" Illumination.

He was born in 1575, 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 Jacob became a master cobbler, joined the Guild, married a godly woman and bought a house in Gorlitz, where he became a prosperous tradesman.



Gorlitz c. 1600

In 1600, Martin Moller became Primate (Head Pastor) of Gorlitz 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 inward transformation and holiness in daily living. They understood salvation as *regeneration* rather than mere *justification*. Moller was regarded with suspicion by Lutheran church authorities, but under his preaching revival broke out in Gorlitz. Many were converted, and Jacob Boehme was awakened.

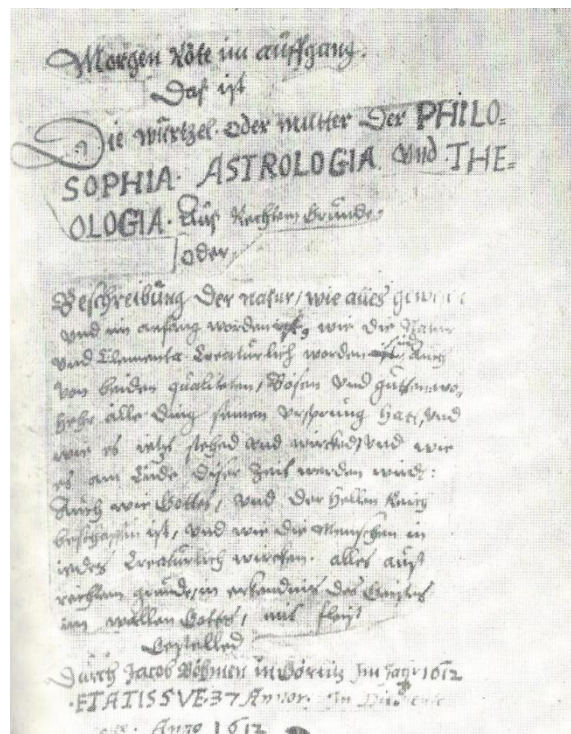
When in my resolved zeal I gave so hard an assault, storm, and onset upon God and upon all the gates of hell, as if I had more reserves of virtue and power ready, with a resolution to hazard my life upon it (which assuredly were not in my ability without the assistance of the Spirit of God), suddenly 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 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 suspicion that he was a crypto-Calvinist. The church hierarchy replaced him with a staunch Lutheran loyalist. Gregorius Richter was 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 denounced "the shoemaker" from the pulpit and demanded that the City Council expel him 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 that day and spent the night no one knows where.

The Council must not have slept well that night, since 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. But the persecution only increased his fame and curiosity about his book! Scholars and noblemen made pilgrimages to his house, sometimes staying for weeks. Friends 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.

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.



The Bohme Residence

Jacob Boehme was no cloistered divine. He was a healthy and active man, fully engaged with the workaday world. He was a prominent member of the Shoemakers Guild, and was jailed in 1604 and again in 1606 over his role in conflicts with the Tanner's Guild. In 1612 he hatched a plot to acquire "beef-skins" from abroad, which brought another lawsuit from the Tanners Guild. There is an entry in the guild book, in Jacob Boehme's handwriting, recording the shoemakers' legal victory. It begins, "PRAISE GOD! PRAISE GOD! PRAISE GOD!"

Ten years later he paid a 10 taler fine for the "black market trading" of textiles. He was caught selling gloves made by his wife and other ladies of Gorlitz, which brought a complaint from the Threads Guild.

City records show that JB borrowed much, bought and sold much and moved substantial 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 trafficking in the underground economy, buying gloves in the country and selling them in Prague and Dresden, travelling dangerous roads through war-torn lands. 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.

His books were hand-copied and circulated discreetly so as not to draw further attention from the religious authorities. But in 1623 Sigismund von Schweinitz 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 stream 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 Shoe-maker'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."

To my knowledge, no critic has ever improved on Richter's performance. There is a striking absence of informed and reasoned criticism of JB. Instead, denunciations are always along these lines:

"Boehme's sect is truly devilish, and the vilest excrement of the devil; it has the father of lies for its origin; the devil had possession of Boehme, and grunted out of his mouth."
(Johann Trick)

"It puts me in mind of what Travellers tell us of a horrid Fanaticism in the East, where the Devotee makes a solemn Vow never to taste of other Food than what has passed through the Entrails of some impure or savage Animal." (Bishop William Warburton)

"May we not pronounce, with utmost certainty, of one who thus distorts, mangles and murders the word of God, That the light in him is darkness; that he is illuminated from beneath, rather than from above; and that he ought to be styled Demonosopher, rather than Theosopher?" (John Wesley)

Oddly enough, Richter's pasquillo 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 lose the Primate for a while, also men may see by the red Wine-pimples on 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, issued 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 Gorkitz 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
[THE LIFE OF JACOB BOEHME](#) a Timeline by the International Jacob Boehme Institute



J.B.'s original grave marker



1924 stone