

Historical background: Jacob Boehme, his writings and the main points of his theology

Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) came from Alt-Seidenberg, a village near Görlitz, a city of about 10,000 inhabitants in Upper Lusatia. The fourth of five children born to Jacob and Ursula, Lutheran peasants of the ‘poorest sort, yet of sober and honest demeanour’, he was said in his childhood to have tended cattle and subsequently to have attended school, where he probably received an elementary education. Young Jacob, whose father was a lay jurist and deacon, was apparently ‘addicted to the feare of God’ and a ‘willing hearer’ of church sermons. Progressing from shoemaker’s apprentice to journeyman, he purchased a Görlitz cobbler’s shop in April 1599, soon after marrying Katherine Kuntzschmann, a local butcher’s daughter, by whom he had four sons. About 1600 Boehme was possessed with a ‘*Divine Light*’ and suddenly seeing a ‘*Pewter Vessel*’ was ‘brought to the inward ground or *Centrum* of the hidden *Nature*’. Presently going out into an open field he beheld ‘the *Wonder-workes* of the Creator in the Signatures of all created things, very cleerly and manifestly laid open’. As he related in a letter of August 1621 to a customs official named Caspar Lindner:

the Gate was opened unto me, that in one quarter of an houre I saw and knew more, then if I had been many yeares together at an University ... I know not how it happened to me ...

Between January and June 1612 Boehme made a fair copy of his celebrated ‘*Morgenröthe im Aufgang*’ or ‘*Aurora*’ (literally ‘Morning Glow, Ascending’), a long unfinished work that had been at least twelve years in the making. Following the circulation of the manuscript and the transcription of additional copies – possibly on the initiative of an admirer, Carl von Ender, though supposedly without the author’s consent – Boehme was denounced by the city magistrates of Görlitz on 26 July 1613, then, two days later, from the pulpit by Pastor Gregory Richter. Consequently, it appears that Boehme may have been

banished, only to be recalled the next day. Following an interview with Richter he apparently agreed to refrain from writing books that 'did not belong to his profession and condition'. Thereafter he sold his cobbler's bench and began to engage in small-scale commerce, trading in yarns and woollen gloves. After an interval of some years Boehme was said to have been 'stirred up againe by the motion of the Holy Spirit' and encouraged by the entreaties of certain people, took up his pen, producing 'The Three Principles of the Divine Essence' (1619), 'The Threefold Life of Man' (completed and copied by September 1620), 'Forty Questions on the Soul' (1620), 'The Incarnation of Christ' (1620), and several other treatises such as 'Signatura Rerum' (completed by August 1621), and 'Mysterium Magnum' (completed by September 1623). Boehme boasted that his writings were known to 'nearly all of Silesia', as well as in many places in Saxony and Meissen. Nonetheless, they remained unpublished until Siegmund von Schweinich paid for the printing of *Der Weg zu Christo* (Görlitz, c.1624), which probably contained two shorter pieces, 'True Repentance' and 'True Resignation'. Three months later, perhaps at the instigation of his patrons, Boehme was summoned before Johann Georg, the Elector of Saxony at his court in Dresden. Arriving in May 1624, Boehme was lodged at the home of Benedikt Hinckelmann – perhaps the court's alchemist – where he received visitors from the nobility and clergy. Presently he was examined by a number of Lutheran theologians about the 'high Mysteries' contained in his writings. Though his announcement of the dawn of a new reformation appears to have gone unheeded, no judgment was passed against him. By July Boehme had returned to Görlitz. After undertaking a journey to Silesia while in ill-health, however, he fell sick of 'a hot burning Ague'. At his request Boehme was taken back to Görlitz, where he died in November 1624.

Boehme's death served only to increase the aura surrounding his life and teachings. A legend began to take shape of a simple, pious barely literate artisan who was given the gift of 'Universall knowledge' and shown:

the Centre of all Beings; *how all things arise from God Originally: consist in God, and againe returne.*

The Silesian nobleman Abraham von Franckenberg (1593–1652) praised his ‘*profound*’ and ‘*deep-grounded*’ writings, believing that they hinted at the great wonders God would perform in future generations. Indeed, in his last years some of Boehme’s followers began calling him ‘Teutonicus Philosophus’, regarding him as a prophet of the Thirty Years’ War. Though Boehme was not moved to address the war in a specific text his writings contain many references to contemporary events. In a letter of November 1619 to Christian Bernhard of Sagan he cited Ezekiel, predicting ‘the great Slaughter of the children of *Babel*’ at the hands of Bethlen Gabor of Transylvania. Similarly, responding in August 1620 to Paul Kaym’s chiliastic interpretation of scriptural passages concerning ‘the last Times’, ‘the first Resurrection of the dead’ and ‘the thousand yeares Sabbath’, Boehme declared that the growth of ‘*Babel*’ was sufficiently manifest:

I say of *Babel*, that shee is a Whore, and shall suddenly breake in pieces and be destroyed, and no stranger shall doe it; the spirit of her owne mouth doth strangle her.

Even so, Boehme cautioned that the ‘Kingdome of God’ did not stand on war or ‘revilings’ or in an outward show in ‘delicious’ days. Rather, the ‘Children of God’ were to be found in ‘Love’, ‘patience’ and ‘hope’; in faith, ‘under the Crosse of Jesus Christ’.

Boehme maintained that he wrote ‘Aurora’ in sudden bursts of inspiration, like a shower of rain which hit ‘whatsoever it lighteth upon’. He claimed he had not received instruction from men or knowledge from reading books, but had written ‘out of my own Book which was opened in me, being the Noble similitude of God’. Doubtless this gave rise to the

image of him having penned 'Aurora' secretly for his own benefit, consulting 'only the *Holy Scriptures*'. Yet Boehme also acknowledged having read the writings of 'very high Masters, hoping to find therein the ground and true depth'. Indeed, the work's success introduced him into the company of 'learned men' such as Balthasar Walter, much travelled director of the Geheimes Laboratorium (Secret Laboratory) at Dresden, and Tobias Kober, Paracelsian physician at Görlitz. Equally significant were the mercantile journeys that took Boehme to Prague and brought him in touch with a network of tradesmen. From 1621, moreover, he began visiting supporters among the Protestant dissenters in Silesia and elsewhere. These contacts provided him with some information and probably made it easier to acquire texts in his native tongue. Though Boehme seldom named his sources, he appears to have been familiar with doctrines enunciated by Spiritualist reformers like Sebastian Franck (1499–1542), Caspar Schwenckfeld (1490–1561) and Valentin Weigel (1533–1588). In addition, he was influenced by the teachings of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and perhaps through his works of German mysticism such as the anonymous *Theologia Germanica* (fourteenth century). Arguably his most profound debt, however, was to Paracelsus, from whom he derived the alchemical term *Tincture* and the three categories of Salt, Mercury and Sulphur. Taken together these sources help explain the presence of Neoplatonic and Kabbalistic ideas in Boehme's writings, particularly several striking resemblances to concepts in *Sefer Ha-Zohar* (*The Book of Splendour*).

The significant points of Boehme's teachings are his understanding of cosmogony and soteriology. According to Boehme the creation proceeded from the nothingness of the Godhead, or *Ungrund* (Abyss). This notion corresponded to the Kabbalistic teaching of the *En-Sof* (Infinite) enfolding itself to produce a cavity of nothingness. From the nothing of the Godhead came forth the Trinity of Father, Son, and product from these two, the Holy Ghost. This doctrine resembled the Christian Kabbalistic conception of the Trinity as a series of emanations – that is three out of one as well as three united as one. In Boehme's

scheme the angels carried the divine names of God. However, ruffled up by pride and unforeseen by God, they rebelled against the light and love of God because of their strong willed nature. This was the rebellion of the tainted Lucifer and his allies who, for their insubordination, were cast out of the heavenly Deity by Michael and his cohorts. This fall of the angels signified a first fall and a first creation of ethereal, spiritual matter. From this first fall came forth Adam, an archetypal, androgynous Adam composed of a non-corporeal body likened to an angelic garment. Suggestively, Boehme's Adam resembled both the *Adam Kadmon* of the Kabbalists and the original Adam of the Hermeticists, who was likewise a hermaphrodite creature. It was Adam who named the creatures in paradise, giving a name to each and every thing. This name, moreover, contained the very essence of the thing. Yet unperceived by Adam his feminine nature came to the ascendant in a subtle manner, transmuting him into a more evil creature who succumbed to temptation by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This tasting of forbidden fruit resulted in the expulsion from paradisiacal Eden, an event which for Boehme constituted a second fall. According to Boehme this second fall was accompanied by the creation of physical matter, compounds consisting of the three principles of Sulphur, Mercury and Salt – corresponding to the Soul, Spirit and Body in the microcosm of man, the image of God and epitome of the macrocosm.

Boehme suggested that Heaven and Hell, as well as good and evil were figured in fallen man. Fortunately, Christ the redeemer had come to his aid. For according to Boehme, Christ, through the power of his love and passivity, would nullify the active, evil principle in man. This process would result in the putrefaction of the natural body and the separation of the spiritual, sidereal body from the dross of the *Limus* (a Paracelsian primal earth). Thus would man be new born. For through the grace of Christ, man, the primordial Adam, would be restored into his original state to reunite with the body of Christ – represented as *Sophia* (virgin Wisdom).

