

The Illumination of Jacob Boehme by Mark Jaqua



Jacob Boehme was the most unlikely of mystics. Born into a Lusatian peasant family on April 24, 1575, it would have been considered an accomplishment for his times to merely learn to read, let alone become one of Christianity's outstanding mystic. Boehme is of the class of uncanny geniuses who may unpredictably be born in any time or place. His writings served as inspiration to such philosophers as Hegel, Schopenhauer, Saint Martin and Newton. Hegel called Boehme "the father of German philosophy" and Schopenhauer remarked that in understanding Boehme's system he "could withhold neither admiration or tears." His writings are dazzling but confusing and contain nuances of meaning which stir a haunting wonderment. The eighteenth century mystical poet Gerhard Tersteegen wrote of Boehme, "I cannot say that I understood, but I read until I was filled with strange fears and bewilderments...At last I took the books to their owners, and it was like a weight lifted off my heart."¹

An unusual event in Boehme's youth intimated that great things were to come to him. Jacob apprenticed himself to a shoemaker while in his teens and would later make this his occupation. He was working in his master's shoe-shop when he was approached by a stranger about the price of a certain pair of shoes. The stranger seemed poor and was dressed as a peasant,

but he had a radiating glow about him and "great eyes which sparkled and seemed filled with divine light." Jacob's master was out and the boy trembled to name any price. The stranger pressed him for a price and Jacob named a very large amount. Surprisingly the man immediately paid him and took the shoes. When a short way down the street the stranger turned and cried, "Jacob, Jacob, come forth!" Frightened and astonished Jacob ran out of the store and to the stranger. The mysterious man took him by the right hand and prophesied: "Jacob, thou art little, but shalt be great, and become another Man, such a one as at whom the world shall wonder. Therefore be pious, fear God, and reverence His Word. Read diligently the Holy Scriptures, wherein you have Comfort and Instruction. For thou must endure Misery and Poverty, and suffer persecution, but be courageous and persevere, for God loves, and is gracious to thee."²

Frankenberg, Boehme's biographer and first publisher, claimed that Jacob's initial mystical experience occurred in 1592 when Boehme was only 17. Boehme left no account of this experience but did mention several times an experience he had in 1600. Frankenberg claimed that this experience was catalyzed by sun flashing off a pewter dish. Boehme received an illumination of knowledge and wrote:

*...my spirit directly saw through all things, and knew God in and by all creatures, even in herbs and grass....the gate was opened for me that I saw and knew more in a quarter of an hour than if I had been many years in the universities.*³

Boehme's awakening was not limited to just this one experience but resulted in a long-term elevation of his mind. He wrote that this experience "unfolded again from time to time" and that he went about "pregnant" with it for the following 12 years.

Jacob Boehme's first book, *Aurora*, was an attempt to externalize his insights and was not intended for publication. He wrote some twenty books in the last five years of his life, but *Aurora* was his only one in the 19 years following his experience. *Aurora* was originally Boehme's personal notebook. Word spread of the young philosopher and Boehme allowed his writings to circulate among an increasing number of scholars and open-minded clergy. In Boehme's time it was illegal to disagree with even a literal interpretation of the Bible. When his writings eventually came to the attention of Lutheran Church authorities he was called before a tribunal. Boehme was threatened with banishment from his home of Gorlitz unless he agreed to write no more. Boehme agreed and would write no more for the following seven years until 1619, when he again began writing in secret.

Boehme was the object of much persecution after this unfortunate event. His chief opponent was the local Lutheran pastor Gregory Richter who would preach wild sermons against the "drunken cobbler"—even while Boehme was seated in church before him! Richter once incited a mob against Boehme which resulted in the windows being broken from his house. Under pressure of conscience, Boehme began writing again in 1619 and succeeded in smuggling some of his works out of Gorlitz by hiding them in sacks of grain. He was once again discovered by the Church in 1620 and banished from Gorlitz. Jacob had given a masterful defense of himself at his trial, but peacefully agreed to the Church's decision. This must have confounded the members of the tribunal because the next day they unanimously agreed to send a search party to find Boehme and bring him back to the city!

Boehme's mystical experience seems to differ in type from what we normally refer to as "enlightenment" or "Christ consciousness." His writings do not describe a state of being such as "Nirvana" or an identity with God or the Absolute. What Boehme seemed to receive was an illumination of Knowledge. He saw the inner aspect and "clockwork" of the cosmos, as it were, and tried to bring his intuitive insights into material form by the use of symbology and analogy. His ideas were the result of an instantaneous illumination and not of concept-building and arduous philosophizing. He wrote of his experiences:

Therein I first knew what God and man were and what God had to do with men. Previously I understood little about the high articles of faith...much less about nature. For the Spirit shot through me like a bolt of lightning. I began to write like a school-boy, and so I wrote continuously, but only for myself.

For I saw and knew the Being of all beings, the ground and the unground; the birth of the holy trinity; the source and origin of this world and all creatures in divine Wisdom. I saw all three worlds in myself, [1] the divine, angelical, or paradisiacal; [2] the dark world; [3] the external, visible world; and I saw and knew the whole being in evil and in good, how one originates in the other...so that I not only greatly wondered but also rejoiced...For the Light's spirit moved my soul very much...repeating many things very often, ever deeper and clearer, from one step to another-it was the real Jacob's ladder.⁴



H.P. Blavatsky in her *Secret Doctrine* claims that Boehme was under the tutelage of Genii or the Nirmanakayas-those beings who watch over the evolutionary progress of the Earth. We have no way of knowing if such beings exist, but the fact that Boehme was illuminated in such an orderly fashion by a seeming external spirit or "Light" does lend some credence to Blavatsky's viewpoint. Regardless, he discovered his knowledge from an inner fountainhead and not from an external, worldly source. As counseled by all sages, Boehme held that all knowledge was contained within oneself. He wrote in his *Libri Apologetici*:

*For we men have one book in common which points to God. Each has it within himself, which is the priceless Name of God. Its letters are the flames of his love, which He out of His heart in the priceless Name of Jesus has revealed in us. Read these letters in your hearts and spirits and you have books enough. All the writings of the children of God direct you unto that one book, for therein lie all the treasures of wisdom...This book is Christ in you."*⁵

Boehme believed that this world is but a shadow play and representation of what occurs in higher dimensions. Everything in this world is the "signature" or symbol of something which exists more concretely in the spiritual world. Since the spiritual world is contained within oneself, the external world and the body could be viewed as a projection from these interior contents. Boehme's insight on this was that:

*The whole outward, visible world with all its being is a signature or figure of the inward spiritual world; whatever is internal, and however its operation is, so likewise it has its outward character...for whatever the natural light is spiritually, that the earth is in its coarseness.*⁶

Boehme speaks of the "corporeality" of the spiritual worlds. We normally think of the "ethereal" realms as just that, as being more ethereal and abstract than our normal physical experience. Actually this cannot be the case at all. The mystical realm must be more real and substantial than our physical dimension. If the physical world is a symbol and creation of what exists in a superior dimension, then our world must be "ethereal" or illusory in comparison. Boehme referred to the physical world as "the sphere of transmutation and phantasy"⁷ and said that it is "like a smoke or a fog."⁸ It can little be wondered that those who have experienced the mystical often regard the physical world with detachment. If one has experienced Real Life then our mundane grubbing must seem of little importance in comparison.

Boehme took two seemingly contradictory poses in his advice on the method necessary to achieve spiritual illumination. At the same time one must surrender and yet fight with warrior-like intensity. Self-will prevents understanding in ordinary men but this very same self-will is necessary to overcome obstacles in the path. It takes the "dark consuming anguish of the fire"⁹ to change man, and this fire is kindled by an interior battle.

Man must here be at war with himself, if he wished to become a heavenly citizen. He must not be a lazy sleeper. Fighting must be his watchword, and not with tongue and sword, but with mind and spirit, and not give over...

Do you believe that my spirit has sucked this [knowledge] out of the corrupt earth, or out of a felt hat? Truly no, for at the time I am describing my spirit did unite with the deepest birth of God. From that I got my knowledge, and from that it is sucked. What I thereafter had to suffer from the Devil, who rules my outer man, you cannot understand...unless you dance in his round.

Therefore if anyone will climb...after me, let him be careful that he be not drunk...For he must climb through a gruesome deep and hell, and he will have to

*endure scoffing and mocking...such knowledge requires no state of melancholy, but a knightly wrestling."*¹⁰

Boehme held that it was impossible for man to experience illumination through an act of his own will. Illumination was an act of grace which could only be obtained through surrender and resignation to God.

It is not a very easy thing to become a Christian; it is the most difficult thing in the world. To become a real Christian, one must break the power of the selfish will, and this no man can do by his own human power. He must render his self-will like dead. He will then live in God and be submerged in the love of God; while he still continues to live in the external world...

*If Christ is to arise in you, then must the will of death...die in you. For Christ has broken death...and become Lord over death and hell. When he makes his entry in a man, there must death and hell in the inward ground of the soul break and give way. He destroys the Devil's kingdom in the soul..., makes the soul into God's child...gives it his will..., slays the will of the corrupt nature."*¹¹

Advice to surrender the self-will is often met with in spiritual literature and it is difficult to determine just what is meant. One might think that if he were to surrender his self-will he would be shuffled off to the nearest institution from the resulting catatonia. While this may have been the case of a misguided mystic or two, it is obviously not what is implied. Boehme seems to indicate that surrender of the self-will is actually something that is done to you as a result of sincere spiritual effort. One's own will is realized at a deeper level as a result of partial escape from the obsessing influences and ambitions of the lower personality. We cannot attempt to do "God's will" because no one knows what this is in any concrete sense. "God's will" can only be interpreted in terms of humanity's deepest aspirations. In the strictest sense, God as the Absolute is beyond anything we could describe as desire or will.

Boehme was definitely not a utopian. He believed that there would never be a paradise on earth other than the one found within man's heart. He saw creation as a manifestation or representation of God, but in our sphere this manifestation takes its coarsest form. In the mystical realms duality takes the form of harmony while on Earth duality takes the form of constant tension and battle. He wrote:

*Nature, up to the day of judgment, has two inherent qualities; one is lovely, celestial, and holy, and the other one wrathful and hellish...Light and darkness are opposed to each other, but there is between them a link, so that neither of them could exist without the other."*¹²

Still a young man when he died from a short illness in 1624, his last words to his family were, "Now I go hence to paradise." Boehme had experienced both worlds during his life, the earthly world of battle and the paradisiacal world of harmony and knowledge. Volumes could be written of Boehme's cosmology, but this would miss the most important point, Boehme experienced a realm that can never be fully described in words. Coleridge could have had Boehme in mind when he penned these lines:

*Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of paradise.*



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