

CLASSICS
OF THE
RADICAL
REFORMATION

The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris



The Anabaptist Writings of
DAVID JORIS

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Portrait of David Joris, Frisian School, c. 1550/55
Courtesy of the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel, Kunstmuseum

The Anabaptist Writings of
DAVID JORIS
1535-1543

Translated and edited by
Gary K. Waite



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*To Kate, Jess, and Brian
for love, life, support*

Classics of the Radical Reformation

Classics of the Radical Reformation is an English-language series of Anabaptist and Free Church documents translated and annotated under the direction of the Institute of Mennonite Studies, which is the research agency of the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, and published by Plough Publishing House.

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Contents

<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	9
<i>Editor's Acknowledgements</i>	11
<i>Explanation of Biblical References</i>	13
1. The Life and Works of David Joris	17
2. The Anonymous Biography of Joris	31
3. Two Songs of David Joris	105
4. Of the Wonderful Working of God, 1535	109
5. Hear, Hear, Hear, Great Wonder, Great Wonder, Great Wonder, 1536	126
6. The Early Correspondence	149
6.1. To the Praise of Our Lord and the Instruction of His People, 1537	151
6.2. The Response to Hans Eisenburg, 1537	157
6.3. The Building of the Church, 1537	175
7. The Strasbourg Disputation, 1538	183
8. A Blessed Instruction for the Hungering, Burdened Souls (c. 1538)	247
9. Joris's Letter Concerning Martyrdom, 1539	264
10. The Apology to Countess Anna of Oldenburg, 1540-43	269
<i>Appendixes</i>	287
1. Joris's Hymns on the Dutch Language	
2. Articles of the Jorists, 1544	
<i>Notes</i>	294
<i>Bibliography</i>	318
<i>Index of Scriptures</i>	326
<i>Name and Place Index</i>	332
<i>Subject Index</i>	337
<i>The Editor</i>	345

List of Illustrations

Portrait of David Joris, c. 1550/55	Facing Title
Glass round portraying the allegorical virtue of Love; c. 1544-56	30
Glass round portraying the allegorical virtue of Righteousness; c. 1544-56	104
David Joris, “The New Man”	148
David Joris, “How One Can Perceive the Spirit’s Mind”	182
David Joris, “The Fountain of Life”	246
Title Page, <i>The Wonder Book</i> , 1543	268

Preface to the New Edition

In the quarter century since *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris* first appeared, I have become even more convinced of the historical and contemporary importance of this collection of works by the controversial Dutch Anabaptist. While Joris did not establish a long-lived religious community, as did his fellow Anabaptist leader Menno Simons, his unusual ideas sparked considerable interest and debate. Some of them, such as his advocacy for religious toleration and his unusual denial of the independent reality of demons, helped to shape the thinking not just of fellow Spiritualists but also of Dutch Mennonites. They also sparked wider debates that helped end religious bloodshed and witchcraft prosecutions in the Northern Netherlands.

Joris developed these controversial ideas while under intense pressure, and how he rethought both his prophetic expectations and the nature of religious identity helps us understand the dynamics of new religious movements and their leaders more generally. Here we can see his movement away from the physical fulfillment of eschatological predictions to the internalization of religion, to spiritualism. This development can be seen in others – not just fellow Anabaptists like Hans Denck or Obbe Philips, but even among the Iberian Conversos, who had converted from Judaism to Catholicism under duress but who developed an approach to religiosity not unlike that of Joris.¹ In the writings gathered here we gain insight into how one individual responded to persecution and disillusionment and came up with new ways of interpreting the scriptures and the world.

There have been significant advances in the field of Anabaptist history in recent years, including some in the study of David Joris as an Anabaptist. Yet much more attention has been paid to the heirs of the early Anabaptists: the Mennonites and their more liberal coreligionists, the Doopsgezinden (baptism-minded). Consideration has been given to the spiritualism, developed by Joris, that penetrated the mindset of the Doopsgezinden; this focused on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and deemphasized external dogma and ritual.²

The exception to the historiographical trend away from the early Dutch Anabaptist movement is the study of the Anabaptist reformation in Münster, an event that has never lost its appeal. Recent research reveals just how porous the lines were between the nonviolent and militant groups, and sheds fresh light on Joris's role in the movement.³ While Menno and Joris both claimed that they had always maintained an opposition to the militancy of Münster, modern readers of their writings need to remember that these claims were made only after the debacle of Münster.

This point is strongly made in recent studies by Willem de Bakker, who has argued that both Anabaptist leaders were much more intertwined in the apocalyptic militancy of Münster and the theology of its principal propagandist, Bernhard Rothmann, than they cared to admit. De Bakker has especially challenged some of my earlier interpretations of Joris's involvement in the Münsterite movement and its violent heir, the Batenburgers.⁴ He argues convincingly that Joris and his supporters, including his closest female supporter and inspiration, Anneke Jans of Rotterdam, believed Rothmann's interpretation of Revelation that the Anabaptist kingdom would be revived two and a half years after the fall of Münster in June 1535—that is, on Christmas Day 1538.⁵ This explains, de Bakker argues, why Anneke Jans was rushing to Delft in December to be present when Joris was unveiled as the new king or “third David,” though she was arrested en route. The Delft authorities, already nervous about the arrival of Batenburgers, arrested dozens of Joris's supporters. Joris barely escaped. This event helps to explain his subsequent shift away from any physical fulfillment of the kingdom of God to an internalized approach. In the wake of this personal

disaster and disillusionment, Joris's mystical tendencies moved to the forefront, so that by the middle of the 1540s he was a Spiritualist rather than an Anabaptist, promoting religious toleration, inner spiritual development, and love of neighbor. And, most controversially, around 1540 he began to write that neither demons nor angels had any independent or external existence outside of the individual person. This quickly became a major part of Joris's controversial reputation, as can be seen in his *Apology to Countess Anna of Oldenburg* of the early 1540s (included here as chapter 10, points IV and V). What I did not fully appreciate when translating these works was how important this idea of Joris's would become. In a number of publications I have since examined Joris's controversial demonology, showing how it sparked a major debate among Dutch writers that contributed to the relative skepticism toward diabolical witchcraft in the Northern Netherlands.⁶ Joris's opinion was still being used in the last decade of the seventeenth century in a campaign to discredit a book by the Cartesian Reformed preacher Balthasar Bekker, entitled *The Bewitched World*, in which he argued that demons did not exist in the natural world. In response to efforts to associate Bekker's views with Joris's, Bekker denied having ever read Joris. Bekker was, however, clearly influenced by the publications of other writers, including the Doopsgezinden Jan Jansz Deutel (d.1657), Abraham Palingh (d. 1682), and Anton van Dale (d.1708), who with Joris emphasized the powerlessness of the devil.⁷ I should thus have included in this volume Joris's first work on the subject, *Behold, the Book of Life is Opened to Me* (c. 1540), reissued during the height of the witch-hunts as *A Brief and Instructive Tract: Wherein Is Treated What the Word Devil Means*.⁸ It remains to be translated.

Where Joris came up with this unusual interpretation of spirit beings remained a puzzle until attention turned to the Strasbourg Spiritualist Clemens Ziegler, an associate of the Melchiorite Anabaptists whom Joris sought to persuade to join his cause in 1538 (chapter 7). Ziegler left behind a number of unpublished manuscript works, including "Of the Salvation of All Men's Souls" in which he internalized the devil, saying that the evil one was "nothing more than the inclination to sin." This is very much like Joris's position, and it seems likely that Joris developed his version only after conversation

with Ziegler, although there is no hard proof that the two met in Strasbourg.⁹

I have explored a few other facets of Joris's Anabaptist thought, such as his controversial reference to the Ottoman Empire as an exemplar of a realm that allowed religious diversity yet remained strong.¹⁰ Joris's writings on religious toleration were widely read, influencing even the conservative Mennonite elder Pieter Jansz Twisck (d. 1636).¹¹ Joris's desire to reach out to the Jews, as seen here in chapter 7, also helped shape discourse on the subject of Christian–Jewish relations in the Netherlands.¹² His relationship with women supporters has also received attention.¹³ Thanks to the personal and detailed biography in this volume, Joris can be a valuable lens through which to analyze a large number of specific topics; he features, for example, in a study of the religious and ritualistic beliefs about hair in the Renaissance and in discussions of magic and the occult sciences.¹⁴ I have also examined how Joris's artistic training shaped his approach to interpreting the world and scriptures; how he developed an approach to emotional stability during the period when he was a hunted heretic; and his scheme for the inner renewal of the senses, which was a critical element in Joris's sense of prophetic mission and self-identity. Joris adapted his artist's mind to establish a distinctive approach to biblical interpretation and religious authority, one that renounced “the dead letter” in favor of a more creative – indeed, sensual and personal – interpretive model that emphasized images impressed on his mind directly by the Holy Spirit. In this schema, logical consistency was of no import, which is one of the most frustrating aspects of his writing for modern readers. Yet it allowed him an incredible level of creativity to interpret the natural and supernatural worlds as he “saw” them with his purified inner sight.¹⁵

Another early Joris work that could have been included here is *Hear the Voice of the Lord, the Wedding of the Lamb Is Prepared*, a tract that had been attributed to Rothmann until 1991, when Paul Valkema Blouw proved that it was instead a Joris work composed sometime after his visions of 1536.¹⁶ This scholarly confusion over authorship implies that the apocalyptic language and excitement used by Rothmann during Münster was very similar to Joris's in

the years immediately thereafter. Even though Joris maintained the apocalyptic hopes of Rothmann until December 1538, I remain convinced that he was not intending to use the sword to achieve his kingdom but expected instead a divine intervention, much as Melchior Hoffman had.

De Bakker has also argued that the anonymous biography, which is the central source in this collection, was written by Nicolaas Meyndertsz van Blesdijk, Joris's major lieutenant. To do so, however, de Bakker has to posit that Blesdijk had become associated with Joris much earlier than 1539, the year he himself claimed he had become a follower of Joris. While I am not certain on this score, Blesdijk was always one of the possible authors of this document.¹⁷

Given the opportunity I would like to have made some other changes and to correct some translation errors, a few of which are noted by Dr. Samme Zijlstra in his 1994 review of this volume.¹⁸ His point that I had missed the allusion to King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of Daniel 2 in Joris's song in praise of the Dutch language is an important one. Not only does it help us interpret Joris's fourfold history of language (following the four parts of the statue in the king's dream) but it also reminds us that while he condemned reliance on the "dead letter," Joris spent a lot of his time interpreting the scriptures, which he still regarded as authoritative when the reader was directed by the Holy Spirit. In his Anabaptist leadership phase, he held that the Spirit within had given him the unique prophetic authority to interpret the Bible correctly. Later, he allowed that all true believers had that same Spirit and authority, and that he could interpret the scriptures in creative ways, essentially fusing the Spirit and the mind. Even so, the Bible remained essential reading for him.

Joris research has been hindered by the deaths of two scholars. Until his tragic death in 2001, Samme Zijlstra was the leading Dutch scholar of Joris and his movement. He was also a great help to me. In 1992, we co-edited a 1535 anonymous letter to the Court of Holland in The Hague, and in an edition of a similar letter written by Joris in 1539, Zijlstra argued strongly that the 1535 missive was also Joris's. These, too, would have made excellent inclusions in this volume.¹⁹ Zijlstra had also published numerous studies of Joris and Dutch

Anabaptism, and his essential history of Dutch Anabaptism to 1675 appeared the year before his death.²⁰

The other loss was that of my PhD supervisor and mentor, Werner O. Packull. His study of Anneke Jans and his works on Hoffman remain important reading.²¹ But it was his assistance in these translations that I need to acknowledge, again, as critical for this book. Since early onset Alzheimer's disease forced his early retirement, I have missed his advice and support; he died in 2018, and I wish to dedicate this edition of *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris* to his memory and to his wife, Karin, and their family.

Gary K. Waite

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18. Samme Zijlstra, review of G. K. Waite, ed., *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris 1533–1543*, *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 20 (1994): 272–3.

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21. Werner O. Packull, "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam, a Historical Investigation of an Early Anabaptist Heroine," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 78 (1987): 147–73. See also C. Arnold Snyder, ed., *Commoners and Community: Essays in Honour of Werner O. Packull* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2002).

General Editor's Preface

The last three decades have witnessed a change in the understanding of the origins, nature, and development of the Radical Reformation in general and the Anabaptists in particular. A growing awareness of the diversity and variety of the Radical Reformers has emerged. Essential to a grasp of the divergences and convergences of the early Anabaptists is the availability of the primary source materials of these reformers. It has been the vision of the Institute of Mennonite Studies to make such sources available in English in the series *Classics of the Radical Reformation (CRR)*.

The editions of CRR, though scholarly and critical, are intended also for the wider audience of those interested in the Anabaptist and free-church writers of the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries. The translations are intended to be true and polished yet not excessively literal or wooden. With this seventh volume in the series, professor Gary Waite makes available the Anabaptist writings of David Joris—the major Anabaptist theologian in northern Europe between the fall of Münster and the emergence of Menno Simons. The list of current volumes in CRR may be found on page five. Further volumes are in process on a variety of radical reformers.

Appreciation is hereby expressed to the Institute of Mennonite Studies and its sponsoring institution, the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, for the continuing support of this series. Gratitude is due to Herald Press for its willingness to make available works of this kind to the broader church and academic publics. A final word of thankfulness is expressed to C. J. Dyck, the founding editor of CRR, who, while carrying the burden of multiple responsibilities over two decades, saw the first six volumes of CRR through to publication.

—*H. Wayne Pipkin, Editor, CRR*
Institute of Mennonite Studies

Editor's Acknowledgments

As with any worthwhile scholarly endeavor, a great debt of gratitude has been accumulated in the completion of this volume. While words of thanks cannot come close to repaying that debt, I would like to express my appreciation for the encouragement and assistance I have received from friends and colleagues on both sides of the ocean. Their support has helped considerably to improve the quality of the book. The fault for any remaining errors can be laid at my feet alone.

In Europe, Piet Visser, curator of the Mennonite Library, University of Amsterdam, provided not only the efficient and helpful service one has come to expect from his institution, but also considerable advice and hospitality. I am also thankful to José Bouman of the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam, for her kind help while I perused the Joris materials in that remarkable private library.

My all-too-brief stay in Basel in the summer of 1986 was made unusually profitable by the proficient service of the staff of the Rare Book and Manuscript Department of the University Library of Basel. On this side of the ocean, Sam Steiner and his staff at the Conrad Grebel College Library, University of Waterloo, were also extremely important in the collection of materials. A note of appreciation is also due to the staff of the Interlibrary Loan department of the Harriet Irving Library, University of New Brunswick.

I must record a major debt of gratitude owed to Werner O. Packull of Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo. For many Friday afternoons, Professor Packull patiently waded through Joris's writings with me while I was a graduate student and a novice in the art of translation. Samme Zijlstra also assisted me in the translation of several difficult passages.

I am very thankful to the former editor of the CRR Series, Corne-

lius J. Dyck, for his constant and unwavering encouragement and advice, without which this project would not have been completed. The advice and support of the current editor, H. Wayne Pipkin, have also been extremely valuable.

I have learned much about editing and translating as a result of the tireless efforts of John S. Oyer and the staff of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, which published two of my Joris translations and which have graciously permitted their inclusion here. I have also profited immensely from informal discussions about Joris with many other scholars and friends, as well as from the support of the University of New Brunswick History Department. I would like to thank all for their patience and interest.

—Gary K. Waite
Fredericton, New Brunswick

Explanation of Biblical References

Where possible, Joris's biblical references are listed in the translations. Verse numbers, when they could be identified, have been added to the original marginal scriptural notations (in square brackets where there is some uncertainty). In the cases of tracts published in the seventeenth century, many of these verse numbers had already been included.

It should be noted that following the conventions of the sixteenth century, Joris quoted freely from the Apocrypha. For the purposes of clarity, Joris's *Ecclei.* is listed here as *Ecclesiasticus*; *Sapi.* as *Wisdom of Solomon*; 1 *Esdras* as *Ezra*; 2 *Esdras* as *Nehemiah*; 3 and 4 *Esdras* as 1 and 2 *Esdras*.

All quoted scriptural passages in the texts of Joris's works are translated from his renderings. Page numbers of the original texts are noted in square brackets. Where possible, gender neutral language has been used, hence Joris's "nieuw mensch" is translated here as "new being."

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1

The Life and Works of David Joris

David Joris (1500/1-1556) has always been an enigma whose importance to the Dutch Anabaptist movement has only recently been acknowledged.¹ Mennonites have naturally been suspicious of Joris's reputation as a spiritualist who denied the necessity of a separated church and who purposely avoided martyrdom with a conscious program of Nicodemism—concealing unorthodox beliefs under a cover of conformity. But these were, by and large, characteristics of his later career, especially after he had moved to Basel in 1544.

Between the fall of Anabaptist Münster in 1535 and the ascendancy of Menno Simons by the mid-1540s, Joris was clearly the most important Anabaptist leader in the Low Countries. He provided the major pacifist alternative to the revolutionary Anabaptists, such as the violent guerrilla group around the nobleman Jan van Batenburg.² And while Joris certainly diverged from mainstream Anabaptism later in his career, there is no denying that he was an extremely influential figure for the Anabaptist movement for some time after the debacle of Münster. At the very least, his writings illustrate the variety within sixteenth-century Anabaptism. They are, therefore, invaluable sources for our understanding of what it meant to be an Anabaptist in the Low Countries immediately after the fall of Münster.

By trade Joris was a glass painter. Recent studies have shown that his skill at this craft was considerable.³ But aside from the fact that he left behind only a handful of known artistic creations, there are good reasons Joris is not famous as a Dutch artist. His career as a radical religious reformer overshadowed his artistic achievements, intentionally so. Around 1537 Joris gave up his craft to devote himself full-time to

his spiritual mission. This mission had begun around 1524 when he became excited by the message of the German Reformer, Martin Luther. In his home city of Delft, Holland, Joris preached informally and distributed anticlerical pamphlets throughout the streets and churches.

In 1528, however, Joris was too bold. His public denunciation of the veneration of the Virgin Mary during a procession in her honor led to his arrest and eventual punishment. As part of this punishment he was banned for three years, and, like many of his fellow religious dissenters in Holland, he traveled to more tolerant East Frisia. Here he eventually met with supporters of Melchior Hoffman, if not with the South-German lay-preacher himself.⁴ Joris was early entranced by Hoffman's apocalyptic message. In spite of this ideological affinity, Joris seems to have returned to Delft after the expiration of his ban as a mere sympathetic observer of Anabaptism. His earlier punishment, which (according to the court records) had included the boring of his tongue, must surely have made him reluctant to engage in further illegal activities.

It was therefore not until the winter of 1534-1535, during the siege of Anabaptist Münster, that Joris publicly joined the Melchiorites (the followers of Hoffman) and allowed himself to be baptized into the movement. His talents were immediately recognized by his new brethren. Two prominent Anabaptist leaders, Obbe Philips and Damas van Hoorn, selected him for a leadership role in the movement. He appears, however, to have been initially reticent to fulfill his spiritual office, although he is known to have participated in a conference in the Waterland district in the winter of 1534-1535 on the issue of the use of the sword on the part of Anabaptists. He also composed a tract on the dilemma of the fall of Münster.⁵

The failure of the Münster Anabaptist kingdom was a pivotal event for Anabaptists in the Netherlands. Many Anabaptists, disillusioned with the failed prophecies of Hoffman and the Münsterites, seem to have left the movement entirely. Others, such as Obbe Philips, moved in the direction of Spiritualism.⁶ Some fled the Netherlands in search of refuge. Hoffman himself was in prison in Strasbourg. Menno Simons, with the assistance of Dirk Philips (the brother of Obbe Philips), sought to rebuild what survived of Hoffman's charismatic movement into an organized, separatist, and theologically uniform church.

In the Low Countries of the late 1530s and 1540s, however, open sectarianism was an extremely dangerous approach, especially for

those Anabaptists still residing in the urban centers. Until the mid-1540s, therefore, most of Simon's success came from his own province of Friesland, in part because he communicated in the eastern Dutch dialect that was related more to the Low German of the Saxon territories rather than in the Holland Dutch spoken by Joris. The approach of the surviving revolutionary Anabaptists, such as the remnant of Münsterites around Heinrich Krechting in Oldenburg or the Batenburgers, was perceived by many as suicidal.

In 1536 Joris stepped into this apparent vacuum of moderate leadership, hoping to revive the religious devotion of many Dutch Anabaptists. Considering the obstacles which he faced, Joris's success was noteworthy. He gained a large and devoted following, especially in Holland's cities, which also spread throughout the Low Countries, East Frisia and Westphalia. His success at winning supporters from other Anabaptist camps also earned for him the ire of other leaders such as the pacifist Menno and the violent Batenburg.

The most important event in Joris's career as an Anabaptist leader occurred in August 1536. In that month he managed to mediate an agreement, short-lived as it turned out, between revolutionary and pacifist Anabaptists at a meeting in Bocholt, Westphalia. Then, in December 1536, he experienced some visions that finally imbued him with the missing sense of divine calling. He developed an exalted view of his mission and authority, based on his concept of the apocalyptic third David.

While perhaps strange to modern readers, Joris's conception was a moderate one compared either to those of the former king of Münster, Jan Boeckelsz van Leiden, or to Batenburg and was not at all surprising to his contemporary Anabaptists. Boeckelsz, as king of Münster, had sought to replicate the physical and earthly kingdom of the first David. Joris's claims were much more modest and he never explicitly identified himself as the third David, although one can easily infer such an identification from his writings and from the comments of his followers. In Joris's scheme, the third David—acting on behalf of the second David, Jesus Christ—would usher in the new spiritual age.

Unlike the conception of Boeckelsz, Joris saw his role as a purely spiritual one, as the authoritative messenger of the Lord. What later leaders such as Menno Simons viewed as arrogance and presumption, Joris saw merely as fulfilling the call of the Lord. In any respect, from the time of his visions on, Joris's previous doubts about his religious vocation seem to have vanished.

On the strength of these visions, Joris set out on an ambitious program to unite under his leadership the scattered and divided Dutch Melchiorites. At this time he gave up his menial task of glass painting to take up full-time his spiritual vocation. He directed his energies to the unification of Melchiorite and Münsterite groups both by means of a vigorous writing campaign and by his participation in several crucial meetings of Anabaptist leaders, particularly conferences in Oldenburg and Strasbourg in 1538. He opposed, at the risk of his own life, the violent activities of the Batenburgers, those Anabaptists who sought not only to maintain the revolutionary spirit of Münster, but also its polygamy. Joris was only partially successful, for while several Batenburgers and Münsterites joined his camp, there were still bands of Batenburgers continuing their lawbreaking activities well after Joris's death.

Joris's industry in his mission was indeed remarkable. As an Anabaptist and later spiritualist, Joris composed some 241 published literary works of various sizes, from four folio page pamphlets to the two editions of the massive *Wonder Book*.⁷ He achieved a degree of infamy in his own day that rivaled that of better-remembered Anabaptists such as Menno Simons. His contemporaries certainly viewed him as the leading figure in Dutch Anabaptism after Münster.⁸ His opinion on a variety of controversial issues was highly sought after and his presence at conferences enthusiastically received.

Joris's achievements, however, also attracted the attention of the authorities, and he and his followers were mercilessly hounded; in 1539 alone, over one hundred Davidites were put to death for their Anabaptist faith and devotion to the teachings of Joris.⁹ As a result the prophet was forced more than once to leave Holland in search of refuge. In 1539 he settled in Antwerp and five years later he moved to the Swiss city of Basel where he was to end his days.¹⁰

Joris's Early Ideas

Joris's reform thought appears to have shifted with the changes in his geographical locale and state of personal security. His writings can be roughly divided into the three periods which correspond to his location. The first period includes the years between 1524 and 1539 when he was an active and enthusiastic Reformer and then Anabaptist. Although frequently on the run, during this time Joris was usually based in his home city of Delft, Holland. After his baptism, Joris sought to blend the ideas of Hoffman and the Münster propagandist Bernhard Rothmann.

In most respects Joris's concepts were in line with those of his fellow Dutch Anabaptists. Joris's compromise solution at the Bocholt colloquium, for example, saw agreement reached on several major doctrinal areas. The importance of the rites of believers baptism and of the Lord's Supper were maintained. Accepted was the Melchiorite conception of the incarnation, which stipulated that Jesus Christ had brought his humanity with him from heaven and therefore had derived nothing from his mother Mary.¹¹ The doctrines of human free will in salvation and the perfectibility of believers were also affirmed.¹²

The slippery issue of the use of the sword in bringing in the kingdom of God was worded by Joris in such an obtuse fashion that both sides saw it as a victory. Although a permanent settlement was out of reach, Joris's success at this conference was the beginning of the dominant role he would play in leadership over Dutch Anabaptism for the next several years.

Joris was like Hoffman in several other respects. For example, he believed that Anabaptism could remain true to its original mission only by maintaining the charismatic form of leadership which had been Hoffman's inspiration. Joris was therefore quite dismayed that those closest to Hoffman, the Strasbourg Melchiorites, had left this path of spiritual safety. In one sense his concern was appropriate, for after Joris's meeting with the Strasbourg leadership, these stalwarts of Dutch Anabaptism orchestrated the dismantling of the Melchiorite fellowships in the area and the return of hundreds of Anabaptists to the Reformed Church of Strasbourg.¹³ Joris was like Hoffman also in emphasizing spiritual or inner truth over externals such as ecclesiastical ceremonies or the literal Scriptures.

Joris in the 1530s, also promoted a Hoffmanite form of Anabaptist congregational organization, with elders, pastors and teachers providing the local leadership under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's instruction was mediated by the prophet, in this case Joris. Ordinary believers were to obey and support the approved leaders, as well as love and assist their brothers and sisters. In his unpublished correspondence it seems that baptism, when combined with the proper spiritual disposition, was employed in Joris's fellowships. In his published works, however, Joris more commonly described baptism in terms of the baptism of suffering. Moreover, in contrast to their reputation, neither Joris nor his followers were strangers to suffering and martyrdom. As noted elsewhere, it was only because of the devotion and sacrifice of his supporters as well as fortuitous circum-

stances that Joris barely escaped death at the stake.¹⁴

In response, Joris, like most Anabaptists throughout Europe, emphasized the spiritual rewards of suffering and praised those who died a martyr's death. He expended much energy encouraging his followers in the face of their terror and castigating the authorities for their brutality.¹⁵ Throughout his life Joris remained a vigorous opponent of religious persecution. His activity in this regard reached a climax in 1553 with his famous letter to the magistrates of Calvinist Geneva pleading for the release of the brilliant Spanish physician and anti-trinitarian, Michael Servetus.¹⁶

This is not to suggest, however, that Joris was in every respect a typical Anabaptist. On top of the commonplaces mentioned above, he developed several idiosyncratic concepts or practices which largely account for the poor state of his reputation. The most obvious was his frustratingly unbending stance regarding his divine calling. Joris's eventual depreciation of the outward rite of baptism and his elevation of his personal authority, moreover, became the special targets of Menno Simons. The Frisian Menno, one of only a few Dutch Anabaptists with a priestly training,¹⁷ had joined Anabaptism in 1536, although it seems that he, like Joris, had flirted with Melchiorite ideas well before his baptism.¹⁸

However, Menno, unlike Joris appears not to have adopted the full Melchiorite vision in its apocalyptic fervor. It was natural, therefore, that the two leaders would not see eye to eye. Their written debate and oral discussions, at the latter of which Joris was represented by his lieutenants, Jorien Ketel and Nicolaas Meyndertsz van Blesdijk, proved often to be virulent and uncharitable, to say the least.¹⁹

The main issue was whether leadership of the remaining Dutch Anabaptists was to be based on Hoffman's and Joris's charismatic claims of divine inspiration, or on a more formal leadership trained in biblical exegesis. Menno's position eventually won the day. During the 1540s, however, many of his supporters were lost to Joris. Although this debate necessarily polemized the two positions, one must be careful not to distinguish too greatly between the Anabaptism of Joris and Menno,²⁰ nor to assume that Joris ignored the authority of the Bible. His knowledge of the Scriptures, including the apocryphal books, was outstanding, especially when one recalls that aside from his participation in the reform conventicles of the 1520s, he had no formal theological training. Scriptural references and paraphrases fill the texts of all of his writings.

What was distinctive about Joris in this regard is that he claimed

to have received the true meaning of those passages directly from the Holy Spirit and not through human education or wisdom. Here again Joris was in many respects following in the footsteps of Hoffman, as well as the late medieval mystical tradition of the Lower Rhineland.

Perhaps the most cryptic of all of Joris's teachings was his sexual ethic. He sought to maintain the rigorous sexual code of the Melchiorites and Münsterites—sexual intercourse only for procreation—within a monogamous framework.²¹ For a time Joris's asceticism went to the extreme of requiring candidates for marriage to prove that they had completely eradicated sexual desire from their relationship by a ceremony that bred misunderstanding and rumor-mongering among his opponents.²² Similar to this was the practice which Joris termed “public confession of sins” during which believers would confess all of the trespasses which they had committed “from their childhood on” and bare their souls before the other believers.

Joris's practice, based on James 5:16, “confess your sins to one another,” was a democratization of the contemporary Catholic practice which involved the private confession of a believer to a priest. Both public confession and sexual purity would prove to be major bones of contention between Joris and other Anabaptist leaders.²³ While these teachings of Joris led to a major division between him and Menno in the 1540s, during the last years of the 1530s Joris clearly represented what remained of the mainstream Dutch Anabaptist tradition.

Joris's Later Ideas

The second period of Joris's thought falls between the late summer of 1539 and the summer of 1544, during which time he lived in Antwerp. This was a transitional phase in the prophet's life. Here Joris gained the patronage of a wealthy noble family, led by the matriarch Anna van Etten, the Lady of Schilde, and her son-in-law, Cornelius van Lier, the Lord of Berchem.²⁴ In the rich cultural atmosphere of the Schilde manor and the city of Antwerp, Joris returned to his artistic endeavors and broadened his intellectual interests, although always for a spiritual purpose.

Joris also quickened the pace of his spiritualization of Anabaptist tenets. This tendency had begun in earnest after the frustrating conferences of 1538. As part of this spiritualization, Joris developed his concept of a “spiritual language” which could be understood only by a spiritually enlightened elite.²⁵ His writings, always difficult to understand, became even more turgid, inspiring one well-educated con-

temporary to remark: "It was difficult for me to understand the meaning of the thoughts because of the terribly obscure and confused style of the writing."²⁶

His ideas in this middle period are best reflected in the first edition of *The Wonder Book* which probably came off the press in 1543.²⁷ In this quite sophisticated work, Joris sought to bring all knowledge into the service of the Holy Spirit. Here the divinely inspired third David was the center for all true wisdom. However, he toned down the more blatant aspects of Hoffmanite apocalypticism which had so predominated in his earlier writings. While the length and date of composition of this magnum opus precludes its inclusion in this volume, the *Apology to Countess Anna* provides an example of Joris's writings in this middle period.

The final stage in Joris's career embraces the years after he had moved to Basel. The situation within Antwerp for Joris and his followers had been insecure at best. Antwerp magistrates had taken frequent and severe actions against religious dissent, and during the early 1540s several more suspected heretics were publicly executed.²⁸ While the patronage of an important nobleman offered some protection, Joris and his fellows could not take the chance of exposure.

After an exploratory trip to the Swiss city of Basel, the fugitives decided it would provide the ideal location for the New Jerusalem, where they could establish the kingdom of God in their own hearts. Joris's noble supporters not only underwrote the relocation, but also escaped with him, bringing along considerable wealth before the imperial authorities could confiscate it. The move, complete with families, took place in August 1544 and symbolized a new stage in Joris's career, as did his adoption of a pseudonym, Johan von Brugge. Joris took on the life of a leisured gentlemen. Neither Joris nor any of his companions experienced any qualms in giving the oath of allegiance, in providing their assent to the city's statement of faith, or in having their infants baptized.²⁹

Joris's Nicodemism was now fully formed. Removed geographically from the center of Dutch Anabaptism, Joris allowed his spiritualism to develop more fully and his Anabaptism receded to the background. Joris's move to a complete form of spiritualism is seen in the significantly revised second edition of *The Wonder Book*, completed in 1551. Most visible in this later edition are the changes in Joris's attitudes concerning the third David. The first edition had brought to a climax his self-conception as the apocalyptic agent of God. It is clear that Joris had made some quite subtle revisions by 1551. For example,

Joris in the 1551 *Wonder Book* edition added a section explaining his current view of the promised David and the kingdom. He closely identified the third David with the Spirit, and spiritualized the kingdom of the promised David to mean little more than the community of those who had experienced the rebirth of Christ.³⁰

While Joris in his later career maintained a doctrine of the third David, he had lessened the implication that he and the third David were the same and instead identified the apocalyptic figure with the Holy Spirit. In any event, as a result of Joris's physical and ideological movement away from Dutch Anabaptism, leadership of the movement left his hands, and others, such as Menno Simons, were able more completely to take control.

The end of Joris's life was quite an unexpected one for such a notorious heretic. Joris, sick and distraught over recent divisions among the colonists, died of natural causes on August 25, 1556. With his death, the Basel Davidites split into two factions, one led by a devoted noble supporter, Joachim van Berchem, while the other, consisting of the disillusioned, surrounded Joris's son-in-law, Blesdijk.³¹ Within three years of his death, Joris's true identity had become public knowledge.³² Sentence was passed against Joris at the end of April 1559. In the following month his body was disinterred and burned at the stake along with his books and portraits.

Joris's Abiding Influence

Although Joris himself was dead, many in the Low Countries, Germany, and even France continued to publish and purchase his writings. If the worries of a Reformed Synod are any indication, as late as the 1620s there were still many followers of Joris's teaching in the Netherlands.³³ Through the second half of the sixteenth century, disciples of Joris took it upon themselves to respond to what they regarded as the slander of those who accused him of heresy.³⁴

In the 1580s, several dozen works, including the second edition of *The Wonder Book*, were reissued in the printing establishments of Dirk Mullem of Rotterdam and Jan Canin of Dordrecht.³⁵ Another of those accused with sponsoring the reproduction of Joris's works was the Reformed pastor Herman Herberts of Dordrecht and Gouda, who appears to have been a devotee of Joris's teachings.³⁶

Joris's writings therefore continued not only to provoke controversy through the next centuries, but perhaps also to influence attitudes of succeeding generations of reformers in the Low Countries.

Joris's Anabaptist Writings

We are most concerned with the Anabaptist writings of this controversial figure. Joris's compositions during his early Reform and Anabaptist career are relatively few in number but extremely important for understanding the nature of post-Münster Dutch Anabaptism. Unlike most of his later spiritualistic writings, many of these early treatises are relatively clear and contain important and historically relevant details.

Joris also composed a number of spiritual songs, twenty-six of which survive in a collection entitled *A Spiritual Song Book*.³⁷ Several of these provide the only known surviving literary works which can be dated to Joris's pre-Anabaptist phase.³⁸ While Joris was not above revising his song texts in line with later concerns,³⁹ by and large the songs in this collection remain accurate reflectors of the early period of the Dutch radical reformation. Many of them are intensely apocalyptic and as such, are among the few windows into the mentality of Anabaptists living in the Netherlands during the high point of the Münsterite kingdom.⁴⁰ Two of these will suffice as examples here.

There are at least fourteen tracts which can be confidently dated to the period up to the end of 1539, and more could be discovered simply by a careful perusal of the known Joris corpus.⁴¹ Three of these are included here as representatives of Joris's early published compositions. These works mirror Joris's nearly frantic attempts to keep alive the apocalyptic excitement that had characterized Dutch Anabaptism before the fall of Münster in the summer of 1535. Dulled somewhat by the failure of apocalyptic predictions, the sword of the vengeance of the Lord still threatened the enemies of the Lord's anointed in writings of this period.

First among Joris's early tracts is *Of the Wonderful Working of God*, apparently written in 1535 in an attempt to account for the failure of Münster. The changes brought about by Joris's visions of December 1536 are clearly evident in a long and repetitive tract, *Hear, Hear, Hear, Great Wonder, Great Wonder, Great Wonder*, written immediately after the revelations, purportedly under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Because of its repetitive nature, only excerpts of this important tract are included here.

Shortly after the visions, Joris received what he believed to be a divine mandate to proclaim the message to the remaining Melchiorites, particularly those in England, East Frisia, and Strasbourg. The unpublished "Hydeckel" contains many letters from 1537 to 1543

which indicate that he took this mission very seriously. Translated here are three important letters from this volume.

Joris furthermore penned several tracts relating to this mission (again under the direction of the Spirit). These include the 1537 *An Admonition in Order to Bridle the Tongue*, a work intended both to announce his mission and to warn his readers from speaking presumptuously about the things of the Lord.⁴² The contents of this tract lead one to suspect that it was among the works sent by Joris to the Strasbourg Melchiorite leadership, the “elders in Israel,” in 1537 and 1538. Its contents, however, are largely duplicated in the letters from this year which are part of our collection. It therefore has not been included here.

Although no dated tracts survive from 1538, this year is notable for the manuscript record of the disputation between Joris and the “elders in Israel” held in June of 1538. This record is not extant in a published form, and we do not know whether this record actually went to press or was even intended for publication. It is nevertheless an extremely important source—not only for its depiction of how Joris publicly defended his teaching and calling, but for its rare insight into the frame of mind of the followers of Hoffman in Strasbourg. The disputation therefore provides a important chapter here.

Several works have survived from 1539. Those which have been dated include *A Very Beautiful Tract or Examination of Humanity's Enemies*;⁴³ *A Very Beautiful Tract on the Beauty of the Beloved*;⁴⁴ *An Announcement of the Coming of the Bridegroom*;⁴⁵ “Behold, and Wake up My Children,” in *The Third Handbook*;⁴⁶ “Behold, a Vision, Seen Openly in the Daylight, of One Who Loves the Truth and Justice of God”;⁴⁷ *A Very Good Examination of Wisdom*;⁴⁸ and *The Eight Blessings*.⁴⁹ This last work is Joris’s written attempt to encourage his followers in the face of the horrendous persecution which they were experiencing in 1539. Because of the length of this tract, however, we have instead included here a letter written by Joris in 1539 on the same subject.

While this summary includes all the known extant works composed by the Dutch prophet before the decade of the 1540s, there are several undated tracts that can be safely assigned to this early period. The criteria for such selection include evidence of intense apocalypticism (still to be fulfilled on earth) and references to specific events and severe persecution.

It is therefore possible to suggest that at least the following works belong to Joris’s “Anabaptist phase”: *Of the Principle or Trust of the*

Heavenly Marriage;⁵⁰ *The End Comes, the End Comes over All the Four Corners of the Earth*;⁵¹ *A Blessed Instruction for the Hungering Anxious Souls* (included here);⁵² and *How the Believer, Who Takes to Himself a Sister or Wife, Should Support Her*.⁵³

These last two cited works appear to be related to Joris's experience at the Strasbourg disputation in 1538. *A Blessed Instruction* will be discussed below. *How the Believer* may have been the work on marriage that Joris promised to send to the Strasbourg Melchiorite leadership after the disputation.⁵⁴

Perhaps the most valuable work for our knowledge of Joris's life—and even state of mind during his time as an Anabaptist—is an anonymous biography composed ostensibly by a close associate of the leader, sometime after Joris's move to Basel. The account is so richly detailed it is likely that Joris was personally involved in its production. In any event, it carries the stamp of autobiography. Its extraordinary insight into Joris's mental and emotional condition during periods of severe persecution makes it one of the most remarkable documents in the field of the radical reformation and provides a good introduction to the writings of Joris included here.⁵⁵ The biography, together with the other selections from the tracts and letters of the Anabaptist leader David Joris, provides English readers with their first glimpses into the thought of this extremely important if controversial figure.

A note about biblical references in Joris's writings may be in order. While the specific Dutch translation of the Bible used by Joris is unknown, it could very well have been Jacob van Liesvelt's translation, which first appeared in print in 1522. At the Strasbourg disputation, Joris remarked to his opponents that scriptural proof texts were not necessary for the "simple, God-fearing believers," but only for the "unbelievers and scribes."⁵⁶ True religious knowledge was mediated directly to the individual from the Holy Spirit, not merely from the text.

In spite of this seeming depreciation of biblical authority, Joris, as these works indicate, was unusually well-versed in a wide range of biblical passages, rivaling most of his Anabaptist colleagues.⁵⁷ As can be readily discerned, however, there was a wide gulf between Joris and his more literalist fellows when it came to the interpretation of those passages. For Joris, the true, spiritual meaning of scriptural passages had been given only to "the small and simple ones who worship [God] reverentially and who are his beloved,"⁵⁸ in other words, to Joris's own community of faith. For their part, his opponents complained that Joris's Spirit-illuminated exegesis played fast and loose with the literal text.



Glass round portraying the allegorical virtue of Love; c. 1544-56
Ascribed to David Joris
Courtesy of Historisches Museum, Basel

