# The Theology of English Anabaptist Martyr Joan Bocher

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*Abstract*: Joan Bocher is the most celebrated Edwardian martyr. This article will defend her identification as an English Anabaptist and delineate her theological distinctives. Bocher held to a rehabilitated Melchiorite Christology, in which Christ possessed human flesh and emerged from the seed of the woman (Mary). However, Christ came from Mary's spiritual seed, which she herself generated by faith. Because of Mary's regeneration prior to the virginal conception, she was a spiritual human as well as a physical human and could therefore produce a spiritual human seed. Bocher also subscribed to the possibility of sinless perfectionism for the regenerate based on 1 John 3:9. Bocher advocated a sacramentarian view of the Lord's Supper, denying the real presence in favor of a commemorative view. Finally, Bocher maintained a firm biblicism, committing large portions of Scripture to memory and distributing Tyndale New Testaments among women at the royal court.

Arrested as an Anabaptist in April 1549 and burned at the stake for her Anabaptist doctrine of the Incarnation in Smithfield, England, on May 2, 1550, Joan Bocher (otherwise known as Joan of Kent)[1] was the only native Englander to suffer capital punishment for her faith during the reign of Edward VI. Her execution was surprising because of her high social status and acumen. Historian Irvin B. Horst described Bocher as follows:

> A lady of considerable social standing, possibly of noble blood, she possessed an uncompromising character along with sufficient knowledge of the Bible to dispute intelligently with the theologians of the time.[2]

As sixteenth-century English chronicler Robert Parsons observed, Bocher was literate and "a great reader of Scripture herself."[3] Although she never

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1. Bocher can also be spelled Boucher or Butcher; her aliases include Joan Baron, Joan Barnes, and Joan Knell.

2. Irvin Buckwalter Horst, *The Radical Brethren: Anabaptism and the English Reformation to 1558* (Nieuwkoop: de Graaf, 1972), 109.

3. Robert Parsons, *A temperate Ward-word to the Turbulent and Seditious Watchword of Syr Francis Hastings* (Antwerp, 1599), Royal Historical Society Studies in History Short Title Catalogue [hereafter cited as RSTC] 19415, 17.

committed her beliefs to writing, the hostile documentation of Bocher's "heretical" activities and statements from 1528 to 1550—first as a Lollard and then as an Anabaptist—makes it possible to reconstruct her theology as it had developed by the time she was regarded as the most notorious Anabaptist in Kent. Despite the fact that historians regularly discuss Bocher's trial and execution in studies of Edward VI, the English Reformation, and sixteenth-century English religious dissent, very little has been written on Bocher's life and thought specifically as an Anabaptist. The present study is the first major treatment of this topic.

Some scholars have denied the reality of native English Anabaptism, arguing instead that the only Anabaptists in England were immigrants from the Low Countries who arrived starting in 1532. This essay begins by taking up the question of sixteenth-century English Anabaptism. It then turns to its primary task of disclosing Bocher's theological distinctives, situating them firmly within their historical context. In the process, Bocher emerges as a *bona fide* English Anabaptist, a remarkably creative christological thinker, a bold witness to her convictions in both high and low places, and a dedicated Bible distributor.

Although nothing is known definitively about her place and date of birth, Bocher was probably born Joan Knell at Steeple Bumpstead in Essex, a thriving center of Lollardy, around 1490. Embracing Lollardy from her youth, she married a producer and trader of textiles and became quite prosperous. She was widowed by 1528, in which year Bishop Tunstall and his vicar general charged her with holding Lollard conventicles in her Steeple Bumpstead home. Upon making an insincere recantation, she resumed her Lollard activities.[4] Through the influence of Robert Necton, an agent of the Tyndale Scriptures whose customers included Lollard conventicles in London and Essex, Bocher and her associates actively disseminated the Tyndale New Testament in the 1530s.[5] Bocher came into contact with Dutch Anabaptists at either Essex or Kent in the mid-1530s. Moving to London in the late 1530s, she became the maid and colporteur of royal writer and poet Anne Askew. In 1542 she moved to Calais, marrying a man of unknown occupation surnamed Baron or Barnes. She and her husband relocated to Frittenden at Kent by early 1543, during which year she (but not her husband) was tried for heresy before Cranmer in the Canterbury consistory. Her second husband died sometime in the mid-1540s, after which she again took the surname of her first husband.

4. Daniel Wade Petty, "Anabaptism and the Edwardian Reformation" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1988), 158-159.

5. Ibid., 163-164.

The Privy Council ordered her arrested in April 1549 on the charge of being a confirmed Anabaptist, and she was executed just over a year later.[6]

## Sixteenth-Century English Anabaptism?

Reacting against the previous tendency to downplay indigenous elements in the English Reformation, one school of British scholarship—epitomized by A. G. Dickens and John A. F. Thomson—has attempted to minimize, if not outright deny, Continental influences on the English Reformation before the reign of Edward VI, stressing instead the continuing influence of Lollardy.[7] Not surprisingly, this school, which might be called "British Originism," has questioned whether there ever was such a thing as sixteenth-century English Anabaptism, arguing that no evidence exists for the practice of believers' baptism in Tudor England.[8] Despite copious references to "Anabaptism" as an English phenomenon in Henrician, Edwardian, Marian, and Elizabethan records, British Originists maintain that "Anabaptism" simply functioned as a derogatory label for any supposed seditionary group in Tudor England, especially following the debacle in Münster during the mid-1530s.[9]

This skepticism regarding the existence of sixteenth-century English Anabaptism is unwarranted on at least four grounds. First, the contention that no Tudor evidence exists for believers' baptism can be maintained only on the narrowest reading of the primary sources. Between 1559 and 1561, for example, some English members of the Family of Love over the age of 30 had been rebaptized in Surrey. Article 27 of *The Familist Depositions of 1561*, taken by Sir William More from two abjured Surrey Familists, reports: "They holde, that no man should be baptised, before he be of the age of XXX. yeares. And therefore have divers of them beene baptised at those yeares and upwardes."[10] To subvert this evidence, some British Originists argue that these baptisms should not count as instances

6. Ibid., 170-173.

7. A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 2nd ed. (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1991); John A. F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England, 1370-1529* (New York: Routledge, 1983).

8. As C. J. Clement asserts, "it is unlikely that believer's baptism was ever administered in England, even in the most peaceful period. If the practice of believer's baptism is regarded as the sole criterion by which anabaptists are to be distinguished, then there were probably no English Anabaptists."—*Religious Radicalism in England 1535-1565* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 31. But Clement contradicts himself on this score (see note 12).

9. Cf. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 262; A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York*, 2nd ed. (London: Hambledon, 1982), 11; and H. Maynard Smith, *Pre-Reformation England* (London: Macmillan, 1938), 280.

10. Familist depositions before Sir William More, May 28, 1561, Box 98, Loseley Manuscripts, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC; reproduced in Appendix IV of Clement, *Religious Radicalism*, 380.

of believers' baptism because they did not serve as rites of initiation—the recipients were already members of the Familist sect.[11] But whether rites of initiation or not, the fact remains that various native Englishmen were first Christian believers and then baptized. Hence C. J. Clement, himself sympathetic to British Originism, concludes that "the Familists possessed their own parallel sacramental system, including believers' baptism, which their elders administered alongside those of the established church."[12] George Huntston Williams's typology properly categorized the Familists as Nicodemite Spiritualist Anabaptists.[13]

Second, the counterclaim that English Anabaptism did not exist before Elizabeth—and, for our purposes, before the burning of Bocher in 1550—is a very tenuous argument from silence. It is indeed true that no pre-Elizabethan source explicitly states that any sixteenth-century Englander underwent believers' baptism. However, this argument from silence is valid only if we should expect to find more evidence of its existence than we in fact have. But we should not expect to find explicit evidence for believers' baptism from the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. The groups called "Anabaptist" during this time were proscribed by law, met in secret, and did not keep records of any kind. Hence historian Michael Ian Bochenski has correctly observed that any "unwillingness to keep records of their baptisms is surely both understandable and unsurprising. . . . The fact that a connection with sixteenth-century Anabaptist continental baptismal practice cannot be definitively established is far from conclusive proof that no adult baptism took place in England" prior to 1550.[14]

Third, we possess strong implicit evidence for believers' baptism in England before 1550. Although it is undeniably correct that "Anabaptist" was often applied indiscriminately as a term of opprobrium to persons who did not practice believers' baptism, it is equally clear that officials who used the term thought that the people they labeled as such at least subscribed to, if not practiced, rebaptism. As Horst noted, Anabaptism

> is an historical name and attached to concrete events and actual persons. When it occurs in edicts and commission reports there is no need on the part of the authors to define it. It had, of course, a kind of classical meaning, and any lawyer or archdeacon mindful of his

11. N. A. Penrhys-Evans, "The Family of Love in England, 1550–1650" (M.A. thesis, University of Kent, 1971), 59.

12. Clement, *Religious Radicalism*, 333.

13. George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2000), 1209.

14. Michael Ian Bochenski, *Transforming Faith Communities: A Comparative Study of Radical Christianity in Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism and Late Twentieth-Century Latin America* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2013), 147-148.

> education knew about it from the time of the later Church Fathers, and that it was in fact listed in the civil law code of Justinian among the two or three heresies subject to the highest penalty. But it was the contemporary reality of rebaptism that stirred the public and worried the officials.[15]

Contra the post-Münster panic hypothesis, Horst further demonstrated that the term "Anabaptist" in Tudor England consistently possessed connotations of heresy rather than sedition.[16] All Anabaptists executed during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI were sentenced as heretics, not insurrectionists; in fact, no charge of sedition ever came up in their trials. Despite the widespread fear that the Münster debacle triggered throughout the Continent, Horst and Albert Jan Pleysier have both shown that Henry VIII and his court possessed direct knowledge of (and were involved in) the political situation on the Continent and evinced a surprisingly firm grasp on the reality that a repeat of this debacle could not feasibly occur in England.[17] Thus royal—and therefore hostile—lists of Anabaptist beliefs in 1540 and 1550 delineate nothing insurrectionist in nature.

Rather, according to Henry VIII's February 26, 1539, decree *Pardoning Anabaptists*, the principal belief of Anabaptists was "That infants ought not to be baptized and if they be baptised they ought to be rebaptised when they com to lawfull age."[18] Likewise, the Edwardian *Act of the Kings Highness most free and general pardon* in early 1550 also excluded Anabaptists from its pardon, and it follows verbatim the Henrician description of the central Anabaptist belief.[19] These and many other official documents[20] permit no doubt that opponents of Anabaptism from

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15. Horst, *Radical Brethren*, 32.

16. Ibid., 56.

17. Horst concludes, "The great fear stirred up by Münster among the rulers on the Continent was that of sedition. We have been unable to find evidence of a similar fear in England. . . . As head of state he [Henry VIII] did not share with his peers a fear of anabaptism as a seditious uprising."—*Radical Brethren*, 77, 95; cf. 61-62; Albert Jan Pleysier, "Anabaptism and the Henrician Reformation" (Ph.D. diss., West Virginia University, 1982), 94-119.

18. *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964), 1:278-280. Ironically, clemency towards Anabaptists was revoked a year later by a general pardon of English heresy, which carefully distinguished sacramentarians from Anabaptists, pardoning the former and excluding the latter.—*The Statutes of the Realm*, ed. Alex Luders et al. (London, 1810-1815), 3:811-812.

19. Ibid., 4:128.

20. The 1537 *Bishops' Book* condemned "all the Anabaptists'. . . opinions" on baptism, ordering: "Children or men once baptized ought never to be baptized again."—*Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. John S. Brewer, James Gairdner, and Robert H. Brodie (London, 1862-1910], XIII, ii, 498. On November 22, 1538, the Norfolk Anabaptist John Lambert was burned at the stake at London for several points of heresy, the first being: "Infantes non sunt baptizandi."—Charles Wriothesley, *A Chronicle of England during the Reigns of the Tudors*, ed. William D. Hamilton (London: Camden Society, 1875), 88-

1535 to 1550 thought various Englanders subscribed to believers' baptism; and several Englanders were accused of, refused to abjure, and suffered death at the stake for Anabaptism during this time. It is therefore highly probable that these Englanders maintained that only believers should be baptized. Is it really so great of a leap to propose that some of these Englanders also carried out the practice? Certainly the believers' baptism hypothesis possesses both plausibility and explanatory power. As Bochenski argues:

> The transportation of continental Anabaptist baptismal practice would seem a plausible development and one that would help to explain something of the ferocity to Anabaptism in the England of this period as well as the specific targeting of their beliefs in the Thirty-Nine Articles. England is a country full of rivers and well-hidden streams.[21]

Fourth, and perhaps most decisive, skepticism towards English Anabaptism depends on the assumption that Anabaptism should always and everywhere be defined as the practice of believers' baptism. But, as James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann famously proposed, and as George Huntston Williams painstakingly documented, Anabaptism assumed different shapes in various regions.[22] On this score, I propose that English Anabaptism assumed a more doctrinal than practical shape and should be defined as possessing four essential features, of which the first three are doctrinal: (1) adherence to the doctrine that only believers should be baptized; (2) adherence to a Christology with Melchiorite origins; (3) adherence to sacramentarianism; and (4) the practice of biblicism. Given this definition, it is undeniable that sixteenth-century English Anabaptism existed and, in Horst's words, "entered the reign of Edward VI as a sizable and vigorous movement."[23] In line with the polygenesis theory of Anabaptist origins, I further hold that English

89). In 1549 Thomas Becon reported: "For there wanteth not a swarm of heretics in this our age, which both deny and condemn the baptism of infants, and teach that such as were baptized in their infancy received no profit by their baptism; and that therefore they must be baptized again, when they come of age, and be able to confess their faith."—*The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, ed. John Ayre, The Parker Society, vol. 3 (Cambridge, 1844), 207). See also Henry VIII's March 1535 proclamation *Ordering Anabaptists to Depart the Realm*.—*Tudor Royal Proclamations*, 1:227-228), Cranmer's 1547 attack on the Anabaptist doctrine of believers' baptism.—*Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. John Edmund Cox, The Parker Society, vol. 16 (Cambridge, 1846), 60), and Nicholas Ridley's 1550 visitation articles for the London diocese.—*Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation*, ed. Walter Howard Frere and W. P. M. Kennedy (London, 1908-1910), 2:238.

21. Bochenski, *Transforming*, 147-148.

22. James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *MQR* 49:2 (April 1975), 83-121; Williams, *Radical Reformation*.

23. Horst, *Radical Brethren*, 95.

Anabaptism constituted a synthesis of Dutch Anabaptism and early sixteenth-century Lollardy, which had morphed from its earliest form under John Wycliffe to furnish fertile soil for Anabaptism to take root.[24] As Clement and John F. Davis have shown, by the 1520s Lollardy already denied the necessity and profitability of infant baptism, denounced Mariolatry, and was strongly sacramentarian and biblicist.[25] It therefore took only two small jumps for Lollard groups, under Dutch influence, to go from denying the effectiveness of infant baptism to affirming that believers' baptism should be occurring and to go from anti-Mariolatry to the doctrine of the celestial flesh.[26]

## Bocher's Adherence to the Doctrine of Believers' Baptism

That Joan Bocher subscribed to the doctrine of believers' baptism is evident from her surprising—and counterproductive—defense when arrested for heresy while living at Frittenden in Kent and brought before Thomas Cranmer at the Canterbury consistory in 1543. At the time Cranmer only suspected her of sacramentarian heresy both as an inference from her statement "that matins and evensong was no better than rumbling of tubs, and that mass and *dirige* were not laudable" and on the basis of the testimony of the Kentish priest John Miles that "she manifestly denied the Sacrament of the Altar with many slanderous words."[27] Christopher Nevinson, the commissary of Canterbury, found Bocher guilty of an unspecified heresy but he offered her a chance to appeal for her freedom on the basis of a royal pardon. Had Bocher merely been a sacramentarian at this time, she could have easily appealed to Henry VIII's 1540 general pardon of English heresy, which granted clemency to sacramentarians but not to Anabaptists. That Bocher was acquainted with this and other royal edicts is clear from the fact that from the late 1530s to 1541 she lived in London and was a distributor of Tyndale's New Testament, as well as various "heretical" books, among the ladies at the court of Henry VIII, becoming close friends with Anne Askew and serving

24. As Williams explains, "it is certain that Anabaptists of Dutch and Flemish origin were present in some strength in England prior to 1536. They found in Lollardy a well-fertilized English soil for the sprouting of the Anabaptist seed."—*Radical Reformation*, 603.

25. Clement, *Religious Radicalism*, 108, 342; John F. Davis, *Heresy and Reformation in the Southeast of England, 1520–1559* (London: Swift, 1983), 408.

26. My view therefore affirms what is legitimate about English Originism (namely, its demonstration of the continuing presence and evolution of Lollardy) while moderating its excesses (namely, its overestimation of Lollardy's power to effectuate the English Reformation and its denial of the seminal impact of Continental forces on Henrician reform).

27. *Letters and Papers*, XVIII, ii, 313-314.

as her "handmayd."[28] As Miles himself remarked, "she had denied the Sacrament of the Altar, whereby she should have asked the King's Majesty his pardon, nother yet asked pardon."[29] Instead, Bocher appealed to and produced a copy of Henry VIII's February 1539 *Pardon against Anabaptists*, which never mentioned sacramentarianism and specifically defined Anabaptists as persons who subscribe to believers' baptism.[30] The obvious problem with the 1539 pardon was that it had been invalidated by the 1540 pardon. Bocher's deliberate use of the 1539 pardon instead of the 1540 pardon can only be explained by the fact that by 1543 she did indeed adhere to the doctrine of believers' baptism.[31]

Because of her ties to the royal court and likely to Cranmer himself, Cranmer, realizing Bocher's dilemma, proclaimed her a "gynteles [genteel] person" and ordered Nevinson to dismiss the case against her, which Nevinson did.[32] Cranmer's blatant bias in favor of a "heretic" drew the outrage of Miles, who complained in a letter to Cranmer later in 1543:

> Pleaseth your Grace, most of the vulgar people think the foundations of these errors in these parts cometh by the fault of heresies not punished set forth by Joan Baron, sometime called Joan Bucher of Westgate, she being a prisoner detect of heresies, being in prison, set at liberty, free for any man to common with her, which is against the law of God and of our Sovereign King.[33]

Hence Miles blamed the outbreak of Kentish Anabaptism on Cranmer's failure to mete out to Bocher the punishment demanded by law. Indeed, reports that Dutch Anabaptists were making converts in Kent provoked the Privy Council to secure Bocher's ultimate arrest in 1549.[34] Further protests were levied against Cranmer's inaction by Edmond Shether in a letter to the Duke of Norfolk and by Prebendary Robert Serles, who later

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28. Robert Parsons, *A Treatise of three Conversions of England* (St. Omer, 1603–1604), RSTC 19416, Part II, 592-593.

29. *Letters and Papers*, XVIII, ii, 366.

30. In the words of the commissary record: "Then did she bring forth the King's pardon which was given to the Anabaptists for their deliverance."—Ibid., 314.

31. Hence Clement concludes that "it seems probable" that "Joan Bocher did adopt Continental anabaptist doctrines."—Religious Radicalism, 52. My reading of the evidence, moreover, corroborates the report of Horst that in 1542 Bocher had gone to Calais to propagate Anabaptist doctrine (*Radical Brethren*, 109), contra the view of John F. Davis, an English Originist, that Bocher did not become an Anabaptist until the late 1540s.—"Joan of Kent, Lollardy, and the English Reformation," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 39:2 (1982), 231.

32. *Letters and Papers*, XVIII, ii, 313.

33. Ibid., 314.

34. Petty, "Anabaptism," 173.

gathered the evidence against Cranmer that sent him to the stake under Queen Mary in 1556.[35]

## Bocher's Rehabilitated Melchiorite Christology

Bocher's most famous belief was the Christology for which she suffered execution. On April 30, 1549, the commissioners at St. Paul's drew up the charge against Bocher, which elicited the death sentence:

> That you beleue that the word was made fleshe in the virgyns belly, but that Christe toke fleshe of the virgyn you beleue not; because the flesh of the virgyn being the outward man synfully gotten, and bourne in synne, but the worde by the consent of the inward man of the virgin was made flesh.[36]

While the charge draws close enough to Bocher's position for practical purposes, we shall see that it fails to accurately reflect the subtleties of that position, which the unsympathetic commissioners did not care to grasp. Bocher's execution was stayed for just over a year, as some members of the Privy Council expressed doubt that the death sentence could be imposed because Protector Somerset had repealed the Heresy Act in 1547. By contrast, Lord Chancellor Sir Richard Rich proposed that the King could at will order Bocher's execution within the bounds of the Common Law. Neither Somerset nor Cranmer, who had protected Bocher during Henry's reign, were prepared to countenance this. Hence Bocher remained at Newgate Prison from April 1549 to April 1550. During this time her visitors included many leading churchmen—Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, Roger Hutchinson, Hugh Latimer, Thomas Goodrich, John Philpot, and Thomas Lever, among them—in the unsuccessful attempt to obtain her recantation and preclude the implementation of her sentence.[37] During the final week of Bocher's life, she was taken into the house of Lord Chancellor Rich in a final attempt to persuade her to recant, but to no avail.

The fullest account of Bocher's Christology is provided by the Cambridge Reformer Roger Hutchinson. When he and Thomas Lever visited Bocher in Newgate, they challenged her with the *protoevangelium* (first biblical proclamation of the gospel), namely, "The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head" (Gen. 3:15). To this Bocher replied:

> I deny not that Christ is Mary's seed, or the woman's seed; nor I deny him not to be a man; but Mary had two seeds, one seed of her faith, and another seed of her flesh and in her body. There is a natural and

35. *Letters and Papers*, XVIII, ii, 331.

36. *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, ed. David Wilkins (London, 1737), 4:43.

37. Clement, *Religious Radicalism*, 53; W. K. Jordan, *Edward VI: The Threshold of Power* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), 329.

> a corporal seed, and there is a spiritual and an heavenly seed, as we may gather of St. John, where he saith, 'The seed of God remaineth in him, and he cannot sin' [1 John 3:9]. And Christ is her seed: but he is become man of the seed of her faith and belief; of spiritual seed, not natural seed; for her seed and flesh was sinful, as the flesh and seed of others.[38]

Hence Bocher did not hold, as accused, that Christ did not receive his physical body from the Virgin Mary. Rather, Bocher maintained that this physical body originated from Mary's spiritual seed, which the Virgin herself generated by faith, rather than her natural, fleshly seed generated by her body. While this Christology is clearly Melchiorite in origin,[39] Bocher drew upon her independent scriptural reflection to remedy what many past and present have seen as the fundamental defect in Melchior Hofmann's Christology—namely, that Christ was not of Mary's seed but brought a newly created physical body with him from heaven.[40]

While brief, the above statement furnishes sufficient information for us to reconstruct the logical underpinnings of Bocher's rehabilitated Melchiorite Christology. Bocher's Christology makes use of the Pauline dichotomies between the natural human and the spiritual human (1 Cor. 2:14-15) and between the natural body and the spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44-49).[41] Although Bocher obviously did not know Greek, she seems to have discerned from the context of Tyndale's New Testament, a book which she possessed, what emerges plainly in Greek: "natural" (*psychikos*, lit. "soul-ish") does not mean "physical" (*physikos*); nor does "spiritual"

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38. Roger Hutchinson, *The image of God, or laie mans booke* (London, 1550), STC 14019, 145-146.

39. Contrary to Davis's suggestion that Lollardy had its own crude version of the celestial flesh doctrine, which preexisted the English arrival of Melchiorite Christology in 1532 ("Joan of Kent," 230-1), Clement correctly observes that such a claim misinterprets the Lollard evidence: "Crude anti-Marian sentiments expressed by some extreme Lollards reacting against 'Mother of God' mariolatry cannot be equated with a positive doctrine of the celestial flesh of Christ . . . there is no evidence that this unorthodox christology was maintained by any English heretics or sectaries before the 1530s."—*Religious Radicalism*, 5.

40. In Hofmann's words, "Jesus Christ is alone the Word of God, who himself became flesh through his divine power, and received nothing from the Virgin Mary; else she would not have remained a virgin. He is alone the seed of the Spirit. Even as the water in the jars at the wedding of Cana became wine through divine power, and took unto itself no wine from the jars nor from any other wine. As the bread from heaven, he fell from heaven and became himself a seed, but received nothing from the earth"—*Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, ed. Samuel Cramer and Fredrik Piper (The Hague, 1903-1914), 5:311.

41. Davis, *Heresy and Reformation*, 410. Bocher may have been persuaded to employ these categories by the Loist concept of the two *homines*. The Loists derived their name from Loy Pruystinck, a slater of Antwerp, who disputed with Luther and Melanchthon at Wittenberg in March 1524. Loy claimed that the human flesh (one *homine*) and human spirit (the other *homine*) are totally independent, having no influence upon one another. Loy was burned at the stake in Vilvorde on Oct. 25, 1545.

(*pneumatikos*) mean "non-physical" (*aphysikos*) or "immaterial." "Natural" and "spiritual" for Paul are terms of orientation, not of substance. They represent opposite dominating principles towards which something is fundamentally oriented—either the person's own *psychē* ("soul") or the *pneuma* ("Spirit") of God.[42] Moreover, without exception the Greek term "body" (*sōma*) in the expressions "natural body" and "spiritual body" refers to a physical, material body.[43] As a result of all this, the "natural human" refers to the human primarily inclined toward the selfish desires of its own soul, and the "natural body" refers to the physical body primarily steered by these desires. By contrast, the "spiritual human" refers to the human whose will is primarily inclined toward the desires of the Holy Spirit, and the "spiritual body" refers to the physical body instinctively steered by the Spirit's desires.[44] Bocher also appears to have perceived that when a person is regenerated, they go from being a natural human to being a spiritual human.

It seems that Bocher ingeniously combined these insights with related passages in the Johannine literature to arrive at the following reasoning. Since Mary experienced regeneration prior to the Incarnation, she was a spiritual human as well as a physical human. While her physical body involuntarily produced a natural corporal seed, or seed that would yield a natural body when fertilized through sexual reproduction, her regenerated immaterial will (i.e., inward person) had the power to voluntarily produce a spiritual seed, or a seed that would yield a spiritual body when fertilized by the Johannine "Word" (*logos*) (John 1:1-14; 1 John 1:1-2). That Bocher believed in the freedom of the regenerated will to generate this seed is plainly asserted in her indictment: "That you beleue that . . . the worde by the consent of the inward man of the virgyn was made fleshe."[45] Since Christ's body was from birth free from the taint of sin and instinctively steered by the desires of the Holy Spirit throughout his life, he must have been conceived with a spiritual body—a physical, tangible body that will be of the same kind as our resurrection bodies, which will no longer internally breed the temptation to self-centered, sinful actions. As Bocher remarked: "Christ . . . became man of the seed of [Mary's] faith and belief."[46] Because Mary could only choose to generate

42. William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1989), 126.

43. Robert H. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 29-80.

44. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), 775-786; Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 315-316.

45. *Concilia*, 4:43.

46. Hutchinson, *Image*, 146.

this spiritual seed because of God's prior regeneration of Mary, this seed could be called "the seed of God."[47]

Once freely produced by the regenerated person, this seed—fertilized or not (and only fertilized in Mary's case)—enables them to live a sinless life. As Bocher noted: "The seed of God remaineth in him, and he cannot sin [1 John 3:9]."[48] Thus as a corollary to her creative expansion of Melchiorite Christology, Bocher advocated the possibility of sinless perfection for the regenerate. This teaching finds echoes in the doctrine of Bocher's Anabaptist contemporary John Champneys, who was arrested along with Bocher in 1549. Unlike Bocher, Champneys recanted of his Anabaptism before the commissioners at St. Paul on April 27, 1549, and bore the sign of a stake embroidered on his sleeve, as an emblem of what he had allegedly merited, on April 28, two days prior to the pronouncement of Bocher's sentence.[49] In his 1548 book *The Harvest is at Hand, wherein the Tares shall be bound and cast into the fire and brent*, Champneys maintained:

> So that envy and malice be sins which the people of God, being regenerate in Christ, cannot be infected withal . . . for the Spirit of God remaineth always in them that be regenerate in Christ, wherefore they cannot do contrary to the commandment of Christ, which is love, because they are born of God, and his seed remaineth always in them.[50]

Here we detect a key difference between Bocher and Champneys: while Bocher believed that the regenerate were not necessarily perfect but would be perfect after they freely generated the seed of God, Champneys had no conception that the regenerate could produce the seed of God. Rather, for Champneys the seed of God was divinely given to the regenerate at the moment of believers' baptismal regeneration and thus compelled their ongoing sinlessness. As contemporary English herald Charles Wriothesley recorded Champneys's opinion: "that after man was regenerate by baptisme and the Holie Ghost that he could not sine."[51] Nonetheless, both Bocher and Champneys concurred that once the regenerate possessed the seed of God, they could no longer sin.

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47. Ibid., 145.

48. Ibid.

49. Clement, *Religious Radicalism*, 63, 68.

50. John Champneys, *The Harvest is at Hand, wherein the Tares shall be bound and cast into the fire and brent* (London, 1548), STC 4956, sig. C3r-C3v.

51. Wriothesley, *Chronicle*, II, 11.

## Bocher's Sacramentarianism

Bocher advocated a sacramentarian view of the Lord's Supper, denying Christ's real presence in favor of the meal as a commemoration of Christ's death. She retained this belief from her time as a Lollard prior to the late 1530s. Bocher likely embraced Anabaptism in the mid-1530s due to the evangelistic efforts of Dutch Anabaptists from 1532 onward and especially after 1535 in both Essex and Kent, in one of which locales she lived.[52] As Henry VIII himself complained in a royal proclamation issued November 16, 1538: "Sundry strange persons called Anabaptists . . . came lately into this realm, minding craftily and subtly to provoke and stir the King's loving subjects to their errors and opinions."[53] The first reference to Bocher in the historical records is from her arrest in 1528 as a prominent member of a Lollard conventicle at Steeple Bumpstead in Essex. Turning to the *Magna Abjurata* of 1528—the result of a drive against Lollardy conducted by Bishop Tunstall and his vicar general in London and Essex—a "Mother Bocher,"[54] later identified as "Joan Bocher, widow,"[55] was charged with holding a Lollard conventicle in her home and for holding that "the sacrament of the altar is not the very body of Christ."[56] As Davis points out, the context of the deposition indicates "that she was then a widow of some substance and social standing with strong Lollard affiliations."[57] Like the more than twenty other Lollards apprehended at the time, Bocher insincerely abjured her sacramentarian opinions.

The name Bocher in connection with Steeple Bumpstead suggests this village was Bocher's original family home. It appears further that her family shared her Lollardy. One William Bocher, ploughwright (maker and repairer of plows) of Steeple Bumpstead, in May 1528 also insincerely abjured "heresies" concerning the sacrament of the altar, pardons, and pilgrimages before Bishop Tunstall. The family name also appeared during the reign of Mary Tudor: one William Adam, alias Bocher or Butcher, a smith of Steeple Bumpstead, was one of three pardoned at that time for sacramentarianism.[58] Bocher's persistence over the decades in her sacramentarianism—which, ironically, became the official position of the English church under Reformed influence during the reign of Edward VI—was revealed in her 1549 trial before the Edwardian commission. When the death sentence was pronounced, Bocher scornfully addressed

52. Pleysier, "Anabaptism," 63-76, 124-139.
53. *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, I, 270-1.
54. *Letters and Papers*, IV, 1869, 2095.
55. Ibid., 1875.
56. Ibid., 1876.
57. Davis, "Joan of Kent," 225.
58. Petty, "Anabaptism," 158.

the commissioners by referring to their 1546 execution of Anne Askew, Bocher's former friend and mistress, for sacramentarianism:

> It is a goodly matter to consider your ignorance; it is not long agoe since you burned Ann Askew for a peece of bread, and yet came your selves soone after to beleeue and professes the same doctrine, for which you now burned her"[59]

Here it is clear that Bocher considered the relevant Eucharistic element to be merely "a peece of bread" and not the body of Christ.

## Bocher's Biblicism

Bocher maintained a firm biblicism, committing large portions of Scripture to memory and distributing Tyndale New Testaments among women at the royal court. At the clandestine meetings that took place at her Steeple Bumpstead home during the 1520s, the old Wycliffite manuscript versions of the Gospels and Pauline Epistles and the recently published Tyndale New Testament were read, expounded, and discussed. John Foxe notes that, even without the biblical text before her, Bocher was "ready in Scripture" (*in scripturis prompta*),[60] indicating that she had memorized several passages of Scripture. By the spring of 1535, Dutch Anabaptists were numerous throughout England, leading Henry VIII to issue a proclamation against them and to have "a great number" executed for heresy.[61] However, these Anabaptists were able to persuade many Lollard conventicles in Essex and Kent to embrace their cause. As Horst described it, many an "old Lollard" became a "new Anabaptist," such that "it is striking to discover how generally anabaptist supplanted Lollard as the name for English nonconformity from about 1530 until the end of Mary's reign."[62] The leaders of the English Anabaptists took the joint title "bishop and reader," as "bishop" was the common leadership designation of Dutch and Flemish Anabaptists while "reader" was the common leadership designation of Lollards.[63]

These English Anabaptists, including Bocher, continued to disperse Tyndale New Testaments. According to Henry VIII, they also circulated "sundry printed books" that had "annotations and additions in the margins, prologues, and calenders, imagined and invented as well by the makers," which induced others "to argue and dispute in open places,

59. Parsons, *Ward-word*, 17.

60. John Foxe, *Rerum in ecclesia* (Basileae, 1559-1563), 202-203.

61. *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, 1:227.

62. Horst, *Radical Brethren*, 37, 56.

63. Ibid., 51; Pleysier, "Anabaptism," 74.

taverns, alehouses . . . upon the Holy Sacrament of baptism."[64] Among these books was an English translation of the Schleitheim Confession (of which approximately 500 were brought into England in 1532)[65] and a work on the Melchiorite view of the incarnation of Christ that is no longer extant.[66] Contemporary English chronicler Parsons commented on Bocher's activities upon her move to London in the late 1530s:

> Joan Knell alias Burcher . . . who beginning to be a great reader of Scripture herself became a principall instrument also in that tyme to devulge such Bibles as were sent, especially in the courte, where she became known to certayne women in authority; and to convey the bokes more safly, she used to bynde them in strings under her apparel, and so to pass them into the courte; but her nearest friendship was with An Askew.[67]

Once Askew employed Bocher as her maid and colporteur, Bocher made use of Askew's contacts at court to smuggle in other "heretical," probably Anabaptist, literature.[68]

Bocher's extensive knowledge of the Bible was confirmed during the year between her condemnation and execution, as she frequently quoted Scripture to withstand the regular interviews and interrogations by such leading reformers as Ridley, Latimer, Goodrich, Hutchinson, Philpot, Lever, and Cranmer himself.[69] Seventeenth-century English chronicler Peter Heylyn reported that all these sessions came to nothing. Ironically, they merely confirmed Bocher in her convictions and added to her notoriety, giving "no small encouragement to others, for entertaining the like dangerous and unchristian errors."[70]

## Conclusion

By the time of her arrest in 1549, Bocher had come to embrace the four essential features of English Anabaptism pertaining to baptism, Christ, the sacraments, and the Bible. This account confirms Davis's verdict that "the beliefs of Joan of Kent evolved from Lollardy to full-blown Anabaptism of the sort advocated by the Dutchmen Clement Ziegler [sic] and Melchior

64. *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, 1:186.

65. Horst, *Radical Brethren*, 50; Pleysier, "Anabaptism," 74.

66. Pleysier, "Anabaptism," 145.

67. Parsons, *Ward-word*, 16-17.

68. Clement, *Religious Radicalism*, 44.

69. Horst, *Radical Brethren*, 110.

70. Peter Heylyn, *Ecclesia Restaurata* (1661) (Cambridge, 1849), 186-187. Heylyn's source for this information is the Elizabethan recusant Nicholas Sanders, whose *De origine ac progressu schismatis Anglicani* was published at Ingolstadt in 1587.

Hofmann."[71] Indeed, Bocher attempted to improve on Hofmann's Christology by insisting that Christ did, in fact, receive his sinless physical body (in Pauline terms, a spiritual body) from Mary, borne out of a spiritual seed which her regenerated will voluntarily generated. This surprisingly sophisticated reasoning was not well received by her opponents, even those who conceded that Bocher at least believed that Christ was born of the woman's seed. Her opponents regarded Bocher's belief as incoherent, such that she in fact denied, albeit unwittingly, that Christ derived his body from Mary. Thus, in 1550, Edmund Becke wrote a twenty-four stanza poem in response to popular sympathy for Bocher after her execution, entitled *A brefe confutaction of this most detestable, & Anabaptistical opinion, that Christ dyd not take hys flesh of the blessed Vyrgyn Mary nor any corporal substaunce of her body. For the maintenance whereof Jhone Bucher otherwise called Jhone of Kent, most obstinately suffered and was burned in Smythfyelde the ii day of May 1550*. Here Becke rhetorically asked: "How can it be called the sede of a woman truly Which taketh no substaunce, nor parte of her bodye?"[72] For Becke and the English churchmen, any seed that came from Mary's immaterial will but not from her bodily substance could not actually be Mary's seed at all.

One question naturally emerges from our study: why was Bocher executed for her view of Christology rather than her view of baptism? The simplest answer is that Melchiorite Christology was creating far more of a popular fervor in the late 1540s and early 1550s than the doctrine of believers' baptism. On June 20, 1549, John Hooper, chaplain to Protector Somerset, published *A Lesson of the Incarnation of Christ*, in which he employed scriptural arguments to defend traditional Christology against Melchiorite and other radical interpretations.[73] Five days after its publication, Hooper wrote to Bullinger in Zurich, complaining that Reformed preaching was being circumvented at London by the holding of public lectures at St. Paul's Cross four times a week:

> The Anabaptists flock to the place, and give me much trouble with their opinions respecting the incarnation of the Lord; for they deny altogether that Christ was born of the virgin Mary according to the flesh . . . I am unable to satisfy their obstinacy.[74]

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71. Davis, "Joan of Kent," 231.

72. Edmund Becke, *A brefe confutaction of this most detestable, & Anabaptistical opinion, that Christ dyd not take hys flesh of the blessed Vyrgyn Mary nor any corporal substaunce of her body. For the maintenance whereof Jhone Bucher otherwise called Jhone of Kent, most obstinately suffered and was burned in Smythfyelde the ii day of May 1550* (London, 1550), STC 1709, stanza 5.

73. *Later Writings of Bishop Hooper*, ed. Charles Nevinson, The Parker Society, vol. 22 (Cambridge, 1857), 1-18.

74. Hooper to Bullinger, June 25, 1549, in *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation*, ed. Hastings Robinson, The Parker Society, vol. 52 (Cambridge, 1846), 1:65-66.

Early in 1550, Hutchinson published a much longer work on the Incarnation. As Clement points out, "both in London and Kent . . . there were a number of people who shared . . . a radical christology that was characteristic of Dutch and Flemish anabaptists."[75] Therefore, the authorities felt an urgent need that such Anabaptist Christology be stamped out with the firmest force, making Bocher the first of only two martyrs during the reign of Edward VI.

At her execution at Smithfield, Bocher remained fervent in her faith and was outspokenly scornful of her persecutors. In a final attempt to convert her, John Scory, soon to be consecrated Bishop of Rochester in place of Ridley, preached to Bocher, to which she reacted with vitriol, a fact recorded by nearly all the contemporary chroniclers.[76] Eyewitness Miles Hogarde reported:

> The grosse martyr, Joane Butcher handled the matter. And where as one Skorie then preached before the people, in tyme of her death, she reuyled and spytted at hym, making the sygne of the gallowes towards hym, boldly, affirming that al they that wer not of her opinion, shuld be dampned. Yea & she was so bold to say, that a M. [thousand] in London wer of her sect.[77]

While Bocher may have been exaggerating about the number of Anabaptists in London, it was probably not by much. A Catholic recusant, Hogarde, cited Bocher's "heresy" and her wide support during Mary's reign as proof of how badly religion was corrupted under the Protestant rulers.[78] Archdeacon of Colchester John Standish wrote in 1556, "Joane of Kent . . . had favourers whiche bothe thought & sayd when she was burnt, that she was the Martyr of God."[79]

Bocher's legacy to Anabaptism may be summarized as follows. Bocher furnished a remarkably intelligent voice on the thorny question of the Incarnation, offering a biblically and theologically original variation on Melchiorite Christology that ingeniously attempted to explain how a Son with a sinless human nature could have acquired that nature from a mother with a sinful human nature. As a corollary to her Christology, Bocher advocated the possibility, but not necessity, of sinless perfectionism for the regenerate. However, any regenerate person who freely willed to produce a spiritual seed would henceforth be sinlessly

75. Clement, *Religious Radicalism*, 61.

76. These include Wriothesley, Miles Hogarde, Martin Micronius, the Grey Friars chronicler, Robert Fabyan, John Stow, and Edward VI himself.

77. Miles Hogarde, *The Displaying of the Protestantes* (London, 1556), STC 13557, sig. E6v-E7v.

78. Ibid., sig. B3r.

79. John Standish, *The triall of the supremacy* (London, 1556), RSTC 23211, sig. A7v-A8r.

perfect. Due to her maintenance of the doctrine of believers' baptism under the duress of prosecution and her willingness to die for her christological convictions, Bocher should be regarded as the exemplar of sixteenth-century English Anabaptists.