

AN ANCIENT VERSION OF OBBE PHILIPS' "CONFESSION"

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In the foreword to his study on Conrad Grebel, Dr. Bender had occasion to refer to "a codex which is in the possession of the Mennonite Church of Heubuden near Marienburg in West Prussia." (MQR, January, 1936, p. 6, note 4) A photocopy of this codex is in the Goshen library. It comprises many documents of interest to the student of the early history of Anabaptism. All are by the same hand and all are in 16th Century Dutch for, as is well-known, the Prussian Churches were of Dutch origin.

One of the most important and interesting items in the codex is an ancient version of Obbe Philips' "Belijdinge" (Confession). The readers of the REVIEW will be interested in a few notes on this old version of Obbe's letter of repudiation.

First of all, the codex version is old, almost certainly older than any of the printed versions, as we shall indicate presently. It is too bad that when the learned Mennonite historian, Dr. S. Cramer, edited the "Belijdinge" for the *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica* he did not have access to nor knowledge of our present version: it is repeatedly superior to any and all of the three printed versions, and frequently throws an elucidating light upon the textual difficulties encountered in the "Belijdinge," some of which had Dr. Cramer floored.

For example, in the passage which relates the shameful conduct of Jan Matthijs in abducting a young girl to be his mistress, the printed versions have, unanimously, "die vercloeckte hij van hare ouders met heijlighe ende schoone woorden." But the verb "vercloeckte" (emboldened) makes no sense in the connection in which it stands: but going to the codex version we find the verb "verlockte" (enticed) instead, which renders the sentence wholly perspicuous.

The same paragraph in the codex version supplies some extra information concerning the details of the Haarlem baker's excesses: "ende sij soude sijn huisvraue sijn, endé voerde se heijmelijk mede tot Amsterdam ende brochtse op een heijmelijcke plaatse, als hij nu daar quam gaf hij voor, van groote drijvinge des Geestes, en hoe hem Godt groote dingen geopenbaart hadde" (and she was to be his wife, and conducted her secretly to Amsterdam and brought her to a secret place. Arriving there he claimed for himself

to be greatly driven by the Spirit, and that God had revealed great things to him.) All this is omitted in the printed versions. We mention this, not because it is useful to know all this of the man who did so much to disgrace the Anabaptist cause, but because we have here quite conclusive evidence that our codex version has greater antiquity than the printed versions. The passage quoted stands between a first and second occurrence of "geopenbaart hadde" and how it came to be lost is easily surmised: the typesetter (or some copyist before him) allowed his eye to leave the page at the end of the first "geopenbaart hadde" and to return to it at the end of the second, so omitting all that lay between. Later printed versions perpetuated the error.

Several of the improvements suggested by Cramer are actually found in the text before us, the pronoun "hij" on his page 134, and the punctum at the bottom of the page. But not all of Cramer's guesses were quite so fortunate. The solution proposed by him for the halting sentence complained of on page 135 becomes wholly superfluous when we see that sentence beginning with "Ten hadde" (after the analogy of the modern 'tenware'; in the 16th Century the auxiliaries 'to have' and 'to be' were still competing for supremacy). Cramer takes over without comment the printed versions' "verbeijdinge" (the act of waiting) a word which will have to yield to "verleijdinge" (the act of deceiving) as the codex has it.

Of more general interest will be some of the remarks appended to the "Belijdinge": by whom is not said, but we are safe in assuming that they reflect early opinions and attitudes. In these postscripts various traditions anent Obbe and his defection are given. One of them is "dat hij om sijn quaade wandelinghe van der Gemeijnte gestraft is" (that he was censured for bad conduct). Perhaps this is due to taking in a literal sense what that ardent Mennist Peter van Ceulen said of Obbe, that to the end of his days he had lived "een ongodlijck vlejsselijck leven" (an ungodly and carnal life). But the expression is used of all excommunicated persons and means no more than "a life outside the Mennonite Church." Another incriminating testimony concerning Obbe is "dat hij met sijn Naber heeft verschil gekreegen om een stuck lands, dat is so hoog geloopt dat Obbe Philips daarom soude hebben een eedt gedaan, en heeft daarop sijn afscheit van de Gemeente bekoomen" (that he got into a quarrel with his neighbor about a piece of land, which went so far that Obbe Philips is reported to have sworn an oath about it, and thereupon got his discharge from the Church.) We also read "Het wordt geseijt

dat Obbe Philips tweemaal van de Gemeente gekoomen is, alsoo is hij de eerste maal weeder daarbij gekoomen" (It is said that Obbe Philips was twice deposed, so he must have been received back the first time.) Here the scribe attempts to give proof for this theory of a repeated defection, by a reference to a hymn assigned to Obbe. (If this assignment is correct then we have at least one more work from the hand of "Demas" than Cramer lists.) Omitting several, we come to the last "it is said", "dat doen hij op het sterven sal gelegen hebben geseijt heeft dat hij sach eenen vuyrigen stoel in der hellen daar hij op sitten soude" (that when he was about to die he is supposed to have said that he saw a fiery chair in hell on which he was to sit).

Without going into the old debate as to the trustworthiness of Obbe's delineation of early Mennonite history, we may say that the presence of Obbe's Confession in this ancient codex, as well as the nature of the appended reports, shows that the authenticity of Obbe's work was not challenged by the early Mennonite Churches. When Peter van Ceulen called the "Belijdinge" a "partidich lasterschrift" (partisan libel) when it first appeared in printed form (thanks to a Reformed controversialist, no doubt, who saw in it excellent material with which to oppose Anabaptism) he started something, a controversy which has not died down to this day. (Both Plaupot, ten Cate and the kindly Christian Seppeling, too persistently we believe, to Peter van Ceulen's techniques in attempting to get rid of Obbe's damaging testimony.) It is better to accept the authenticity of Obbe's "Belijdinge". But that does not mean that his representations are not to be challenged. When he puts all the early Mennonites in the same category with the fanatics who staged the Münster and the Oude Clooster excesses, it is needful to remember that it was in the interest of Obbe's own integrity so to represent things. All told it is indisputable that there were Anabaptists and Anabaptists.



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