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Pilgrims and Martyrs: The Engraved Title Page of Ephrata's *Martyrs Mirror*

By Jeff Bach

The largest book produced in colonial America was translated and printed by the celibate brothers of the Ephrata Community in Pennsylvania in 1748. A curious engraving served as a title page for several copies, but not all. The book from the Ephrata press was the first complete German translation of martyr stories featuring Anabaptists, collected and written in Dutch by Thieleman Jansz van Braght in 1660. This book, known in English as the *Martyrs Mirror*, connected the stories of Anabaptist martyrs to a chain of Christian martyrs through the centuries, going back to the apostles and Jesus.

The Ephrata Community was founded by Conrad Beissel at its current site in 1732. It grew from a separation that Beissel led out of the Brethren, or Dunkers (today's Church of the Brethren) in 1728. The community had acquired at least one printing press by 1745. Mennonites living north and west of Philadelphia commissioned the Ephrata Community to print the martyrology.

The illustration that serves as a title page in some of the Ephrata volumes gives a pictorial allegory for the Christian life, featuring the baptism of Jesus by immersion at the center of the picture. After renouncing the world, believers bear the cross of Christ and arrive in heaven. It is likely that the title page was done by the Frankfurt engraver, Michael Eben, who created a second, extremely rare engraved title page for the second half of Ephrata's *Martyrs Mirror*.¹

The translation into English of the title on the engraving is: "Martyrs Mirror, of the Baptist-Minded, printed and published by the Brotherhood of Ephrata,"² although the name of the community is misspelled as "Euphratha." The community's name had first appeared in print in 1736, four years after Beissel and some followers settled on the banks of the Cocalico Creek. The phrase, "Baptist-minded" (*Tauf-gesinnten*) referred to Mennonites and is in the title page of the Dutch original (in its Dutch form, *Doopsgezinde*). The name refers to the practice of baptizing adult believers



Title on engraved title page.

upon confession of faith, rather than infant baptism, which was typical in most churches at the time.

The pictorial allegory on the title page begins in the lower right corner of the illustration. It winds to the left, then diagonally upward to the central image of the baptism of Jesus. The procession of images then winds to the left to scenes of persecution and diagonally upward to scenes of glory in heaven. Several numerals or letters appear next to some of the figures. These numerals and letters may have corresponded to a printed explanation of the page, although none has yet been found.

In the lower right corner of the title page stands a four-legged animal, covered with eyes, having a lion's head and six wings (marked as figure 1). This image represents the first of four strange living creatures described in Revelation, chapter 4. Depictions of the other three creatures appear on this page also. According to the Book of Revelation, these four creatures praise God continually day and night. In Revelation, chapter 6 they announce the first four calamities of the book, and they worship with the saints in chapters 7 and 14.

Behind the first creature, a procession of people walks toward the left of the page. Behind them is a vignette, on the right side of the page. It depicts a public house or inn and eight people dressed in fashionable (but not opulent) clothing, making merry (figure 2). A wall encloses the house and group, setting them apart from the procession. Two men play stringed instruments, probably a violin and a bass viol. Two couples, each consisting of a man and a woman, appear to be dancing. Behind them another woman stands with arm upraised, holding a flagon, about to pour a beverage into a cup in her other hand. To the left of the group, a man stands holding an object, perhaps something that he might throw

at the procession. The scene suggests that those who follow Christ must move away from worldly pleasures and be prepared for the possibility of opposition.

As the procession moves leftward, they make a 90-degree turn. The path narrows visibly as they move upward to the right, toward the center of the page. The Ephrata Community, like many dissenting Christian minorities of the time, believed that the life of faith and self-denial was a narrow path (see Matt. 7:13-14) that few would follow.

At the point at the bottom left where the procession makes its sharp turn, a robed man stands, holding a large double tablet (figure b). On the tablet are the Roman numerals I through X. Behind him is a representation of a mountain, capped with a large cloud from which two lightning bolts emerge (marked as figure a). This vignette illustrates Moses receiving the Ten Commandments at Sinai (Exod. 20). Moses points upward to the right, toward the center of the page. A ray of light streams from him toward the center of the page where Jesus is being baptized. Within this beam appear the words, "*Den sollt ihr hören*," meaning "You shall listen to him." These words recall the voice heard at the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 7:15). At the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. This vignette with its figure of Moses may suggest that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law.

Slightly to the right of the figure of Moses, but still in the bottom left corner of the frontispiece, lies another creature in repose (figure c). It is covered with eyes, has six wings and its face resembles that of a cow or an ox. It represents the second of the four living creatures (Rev. 4), this one with the "face of an ox."

The central image of the page shows a man dressed in animal skins baptizing another man, who has a halo (figure 4). The baptizer is preparing to immerse the other man into what appears to be a river. This scene depicts the baptism of Jesus. The large procession moves directly (figure 3) toward the baptism, some believers already entering the water. This vignette depicts the central importance of adult baptism for believers on the journey of faith, fulfilling the teaching and example of Jesus. It is the central identifying practice of Anabaptist groups, including Mennonites, the Ephrata Community and the Brethren. The Ephrata Community practiced baptism by three-fold immersion in the names of the Trinity, as the Brethren still do. This practice was novel in the West in 1708, when the Brethren began. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, the originators of the Mennonites, practiced adult baptism by pouring out water upon

the heads of kneeling candidates. Some writers have conjectured that the engraved title page in the Ephrata *Martyrs Mirror* was omitted from copies that were intended for sale to Mennonites, in order not to offend those who preferred affusion (pouring) rather than immersion as the mode of baptism. However, some copies with the illustration have documented ownership in Mennonite families going back to the time of purchase.³

A beam of light flows out of a bright sun in the upper left corner of the illustration, descending diagonally downward to the baptismal scene in the center of the page. In the left corner within the sun appear the Hebrew letters for the tetragrammaton, YHWH (figure 8), the four letters for the divine name, Yahweh, as given in Exod. 3:14 (in anglicized form, Jehovah). This device was common to many illustrations in Pietist literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The use of the Hebrew letters for the name of God places the engraver and his clients at Ephrata within this convention in Pietist allegorical art.

In the beam of light descending from the upper left appear again the words, “*Den sollt ihr hören.*” Near the baptismal scene a dove descends toward Jesus and John the Baptist. The light and the dove represent the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism (Matt. 3:13-17 and parallels). However, none of the four gospel accounts reports the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism saying, “Listen to him.” The Ephrata illustration has probably repeated the words from the transfiguration as a call for readers to listen to the gospel and teachings of Jesus Christ and obey them.

On the bank of the stream behind the baptismal scene, more believers continue in procession. Each now bears a cross. To their right stands a four-legged creature covered with eyes, and having a human face and six wings. These features suggest that it is the third of the four living creatures in Revelation 4.

The pilgrims bearing their crosses move toward the left of the page, where they encounter a hillside and some martyrs (figure e; no figure d seems to be marked on the frontispiece). At the top of the hill are three crosses, for the three crosses on Calvary for Jesus and two thieves (Matt 27:38). Near the three crosses, a man is being crucified upside down on an X-shaped cross. This may represent the tradition about the crucifixion of the apostle Andrew, who was supposedly crucified on such a cross, although not upside down. At the center of the scene of martyrdom, a man is being tortured in a cauldron that sits on a fire. Beside him, a woman is kneeling about to be beheaded by an executioner. Behind them stands a low, three-

sided frame on three legs. While these martyrs are unidentified, they may perhaps represent the story of Zenobius and his sister, Zenobia, presented in the *Martyrs Mirror* as having died in 285 at Agaea.⁴ According to the account in the *Martyrs Mirror*, Zenobius was tortured on some kind of rack and his sister was tortured on a “red hot iron bed.” Then both were placed in boiling water, and finally they were beheaded. The triangular frame in the frontispiece may represent some kind of instrument of torture, and the man in the cauldron and the kneeling woman may represent the other two phases of the sufferings of these two. One woman in the celibate sisters’ order at Ephrata took the spiritual name “Zenobia.”⁵

Directly above the three crosses on the hilltop, a bird-like creature covered with eyes and having six wings flies in the sky. This probably represents the fourth living creature in Revelation 4, an eagle. Ascending from the hilltop, through the air, more saints appear, now without crosses. They appear to move through the dark cloud that overshadows the procession of cross-bearing believers. Some believers emerge on the other side of the cloud and continue moving upward and at first to the right. They encircle a hill on which stands a lamb (figure 5, see front cover) holding the medieval banner of triumph for Christ, a long staff, with a short crossbar near the top. From this crossbar a banner unfurls. This symbol of the lamb with staff and banner was used throughout the Middle Ages and afterward as a sign for Christ, the Lamb of God who triumphed over death. It represents the Lamb on Mt. Zion, whom saints encounter in Revelation 7. In this heavenly scene at the top of the page, other saints come from the left (figure 7), where an image suggestive of the sun fills the left corner. These approaching saints carry palm branches, representing the saints already in heaven (Rev. 7:9). The Ephrata members may also have had in mind the reference to the 144,000 who were celibate and followed the Lamb wherever it went (Rev. 14:4). The four living creatures of Revelation may appear in this engraving because they are mentioned in both accounts of the saints in Revelations, chapters 7 and 14. The fact that both of these scenes of heavenly saints appear in chapters numbered seven, or a multiple of seven (chapter 14) would have been significant for a sabbatarian community like Ephrata, who believed that the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, was a weekly sign of the eternal Sabbath that Christ would establish at his return. At the center of the top of the page is a circle of twenty-three palm trees (figure 6), enclosing a clear space. The significance of this image is unclear.

In sum, the engraved title page represents the journey of faith largely as the Ephrata Community understood it. Conversion and turning away from worldly pleasures mark the beginning. Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection is at the heart of Christian life. The Law and the prophets of the Old Testament point toward Christ as their fulfillment. The journey of Christian faith involves bearing the cross of Christ and perhaps suffering actual martyrdom, like ancient Christians and the Anabaptists in the *Martyrs Mirror*. For some at the Ephrata Community, martyrdom also involved a life of extreme self-denial through asceticism, including celibacy, fasting and shortened times of sleep. The journey through suffering would lead to the joys of heaven, worshiping God and Christ, the Lamb of God, on the heavenly Mt. Zion. While many of the symbolic details of the illustration await further research, together the elements of the scene suggest something of their understanding of the faith of the saints.

Notes

1. There are two known copies of the second engraved title page. One is held at Muddy Creek Farm Library at Ephrata, Pennsylvania, and the other is at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.
2. "Martyrer=Spiegel der Taufgesinnten, druckt und verlegt der Brüderschaft in Ephrata."
3. David Luthy, "German Printings of the Martyrs' Mirror," *Family Life* (Aug./Sept. 1976): 17.
4. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm, 13th ed. (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1982), 145.
5. Jeff Bach, "The Death Registers of the Ephrata Cloister," *Journal of the Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley* 23 (1996), 12, 30, 38, 41. Sister Zenobia died in March 1798, at age seventy-two. The information is taken from a variety of death records kept by the Ephrata Community. According to Ezechiel Sangmeister's autobiography, she was one of three sisters from the Stättler family who were nuns at Ephrata. See Ezechiel Sangmeister, *Leben und Wandel des in GOTT ruhenden und seligen Br. Ezechiel Sangmeisters* (Ephrata: Joseph Baumann, 1825), 64.

The illustrations that follow are details of the engraved title page of *Martyrer=Spiegel der Tauffs-gesinnten, druckts und verlegt der Brüderschaft in Euphratha* found on p. 82. These details are labeled with the same figure number or letter as found in the engraved title page, and they are in the order discussed in the article. Note that figure 5 is on the front cover.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figures b and c.



Figure 4.



Figure e.