

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.



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