An Early Modern Young Prophet: The Heavenly Messages of Evert Willemsz Bogaert and their Recognition, 1622–23

Willem Frijhoff

Prophecy, as is well known, has never been limited to adults or to gender roles, to religious trends, geographic areas, or specific time periods. From the viewpoint of the cultural historian, prophecy is the (mostly individual) expression of a strong, often dramatic concern about the future that aims at alerting a community and persuading them to change their life-style or their views and values, by appealing to a higher, ultimate authority. As a rule, a prophet has an acute sense of what goes on in his or her community. He or she benefits from a pre-existing readiness to believe the messenger and to adopt the views on past, present and future brought up by the prophet. The more so as prophets tend to frame their message in a familiar symbolic language that by its timeless content and its references to former instances of successful prophecy resists the wear of time and makes the message credible. But structures of credibility are always embedded in the practical forms which communication adopts in a given time and space. It is precisely the topical form taken by the prophet’s agency in the communicative process that interests the historian. In this contribution I want to present and briefly analyse a case of early modern prophecy that shows with a particular clarity how such prophets benefit from the pre-existing structures and symbolic language of prophetic agency and capitalize on the current affairs of their religious and secular communities.¹

An Unprivileged Youngster

During the summer of 1622 and the following winter, the small Holland town of Woerden on the Rhine was buzzing with rumours. A fifteen year old boy called Evert Willemsz [Evert, son of Willem], native of the town, had been assailed by a sudden illness, physical problems, and a spiritual experience. He claimed to

communicate, through an angel, with his heavenly Father. The boy lived at the local orphanage, together with his older brother Pieter and two younger half-brothers. Cornelis (d. 1669), their eldest brother, probably trained as a tailor, lived nearby in town. Evert’s family name was Bogaert, but as a literate man he later used only its Latin form Bogardus – so at Leiden University, where he matriculated in 1627, and in the small, newly founded town of New Amsterdam on the island of Manhattan, present-day New York, where in 1632 he finally was appointed a minister of God’s Holy Word. He worked there, in the immense territory that was his parish, until his sudden, unexpected death in a shipwreck in September 1647, on the way back to his fatherland for the settlement of a long-standing quarrel with the governor of the colony. By then, he was only 40 years old.\(^2\) The family members he left in the new world – his own four young sons, his Scandinavian wife Annetgen Jans, and her five surviving children from a previous marriage – may have been aware of his prophetic past in Holland, but apparently they have not cherished it in their historic memory. His troublesome American life course, with its own prophetic accents, had become for them a memorable event in its own right.

We have no certain information concerning Evert’s parents. He presumably lost his natural father Willem Bogaert when he was very young. He was certainly educated by his stepfather Muysvoet, who must have died, just as Evert’s natural mother did, some years before the onset of the boy’s spiritual