

Life of Jacobus Arminius, 1559-1609.

“There lived in Holland a man whom they who did not know could not sufficiently esteem, whom they who did not esteem had never sufficiently known.” (1) Jacobus Arminius, D.D., was born on c. October 10th 1559 (2) in Oudewater, South Holland, to parents Harmen Jacobszoon and Elborch Jacobsdochter. He was named originally James Hermanns (or Hermanson). His father Harmen worked as a wapensmid—a maker of swords, armour and guns—which was an important position in Oudewater due to its military significance leading up to and throughout the Dutch War of Independence of 1568-1648, and his mother Elborch maintained strong family ties which proved important as Arminius’ life progressed. (3)

Herman died during Arminius’ infancy, putting his family into financial difficulty. Fortunately however Elborch soon inherited some property in Oudewater; Arminius also inherited a property at about six years of age which was rented out to support the family. Since he was required by law to obtain a legal male guardian to oversee the house’s financial proceedings, Elborch’s cousin Heer Dirk Amelgerszoon (or, Theodorus Æmilius), the local parish priest, took charge over the young Arminius, taking him into his home in Utrecht, where he personally saw to the young man’s early education in theology, Latin and Greek. Æmilius became a mentor to Arminius and spurred him on to be devoted to God and to conscience above all else in the world. (4) As he observed the development of Arminius’ young mind he organised for his enrolment into the famous St. Jerome School in Utrecht, a school which was famous for its foundation in reformed biblical piety and the Renaissance humanist tradition. It taught a vast curriculum, including; logic, dialectic, rhetoric, classical philosophy and literature (Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Aristotle, Homer, Plutarch and Terence), mathematics, physics, Ancient Hebrew, Latin, Greek, biblical studies of the Gospels offered in Latin and/or Greek, Church history, Patristic Studies (St. John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Athanasius et al) and contemporary Church thought such as Erasmus. School commenced every day from early morning to late at night seven days a week, and Sundays and religious

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holidays were devoted to the Bible or a Church Father. Arminius would have been required to learn each of these subjects thoroughly at their required set levels, and this education laid the foundation for Arminius' further theological studies. (5)

Arminius' studies at the St. Jerome School ended with the death of Æmilius in early 1575 after which Arminius was left stranded in Utrecht without a legal guardian. Fortunately, a man by the name of Roelof van Roijen van Schadenbroek (or, Rudolfus Snellius), native to Oudewater and cousin to Arminius on his mother's side, was passing through Utrecht from Hesse-Cassel, Germany, to where he had previously fled to escape the war with Spain. Snellius found Arminius in Utrecht and took him under his charge as legal guardian. They travelled back to Marburg in Germany where Arminius matriculated, continuing on in similar studies to those in the St Jerome School in Utrecht. There he later graduated and was dubbed Iacobus Hermannus Hollandus—James Hermann of Holland—in the traditional scholarly manner of Latin naming. Thereafter, Snellius took Arminius to Hesse-Cassel to take up residence there. Arminius was about fifteen years old. (6) No longer had Arminius arrived at Hesse-Cassel however than had the report of the Spanish massacre of Arminius' hometown Oudewater reached him: the city had been razed and the majority of its inhabitants butchered irrespective of age or gender in an event thereafter known as The Oudewater Massacre. Following a two-week period of mourning, Arminius resolved to take the four-hundred kilometre journey back to Oudewater by foot in order to determine the fate of his family even if he should die in the process. It was, as Carl Bangs explains, “the coincidence of national struggle and personal tragedy.” (7) When Arminius reached the charred remains of his hometown the scene was gruesome; rubbish was everywhere and piles of dead Oudewater citizens lay strewn into disorderly heaps. Having confirmed the fate of his family for himself (all dead, save an aunt, a sister and perhaps a brother), Arminius returned to Hesse-Cassel via Marburg for a short time. (8)

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Soon news reached Hesse-Cassel after Arminius' return that Prince William I of Orange had liberated Leiden from Spanish occupation and established a new university there on the 8th of February 1575. The establishment of Universiteit Leyden (or, the University of Leiden) was a significant event for the Dutch people. As the first entirely protestant academic institution in the Netherlands, the university stood as a symbol of liberation and nationhood for all Holland. This prompted Arminius to move to the city of Rotterdam, a free city and refuge for Protestants, where he lived under the roof of Peter Bertius the Elder, the pastor of the reformed church, in preparation to go to Leiden. The university attracted several notable Dutch intellectuals under whom Arminius studied after beginning in 1575, including; Hermannus Reynecherus, professor of Hebrew studies (under whose roof in Leiden Arminius lived along with other students), Casper Janszoon Coolhaes, an eminent theologian of his day, and Lambert Danæus, a respected professor of theology, philosophy and Patristic Studies. It was at Leiden that Arminius' Latin name, Jacobus Arminius, was first used. (9)

Arminius excelled very well in his studies, earning the respect of his peers such that "Whenever anything was to be written, or spoken, or any doubt resolved, Arminius was sure to be consulted." (10) By 1578 Arminius' cousin Rudolfus Snellius was employed by the university to lecture in Mathematics which Arminius studied him that same year. Arminius studied additional interests such as astronomy and poetry. At Leiden his thinking was also influenced by Ramism, a philosophical logical theory developed by the French humanist, logician and educational reformer Pierre de la Ramée (or, Petrus Ramus) who sought to make logic into a more practical discipline in opposition to what he perceived to be the mere theorisation of classical Aristotelian logic. (11) By 1581 Arminius graduated from his studies at about twenty-two years of age, at which time the Amsterdam burgomasters and local clergy began to take an interest in him, for he had become well-known as a brilliant student. They recommended him to De Hoofluiden van het Kraemers Gildt (or, The Merchant's

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Guild of St. Martin) for future studies abroad under their sponsorship if he would pledge his services to the Reformed Church in Amsterdam after the completion of his studies—an offer which Arminius hastily accepted. Under the sponsorship of the Merchant's Guild Arminius was sent to the University of Geneva in Switzerland to study under the coordination of Theodore Beza, the son-in-law of the French humanist and religious reformer John Calvin who had taught at Geneva during the sixteenth century. Arminius signed the Geneva registrar on the 1st of January 1582, enrolling as a student of the Liberal Arts focusing on theology.

(12)

Arminius pursued his education at Geneva with rigor, and it was there where he met Johannes Uitenbogard who was to become Arminius' closest lifelong friend and defender. Arminius was actively involved in Geneva and even defended Ramism in public debates, dialogues and private lectures at the request of his peers. This however managed to cause offence towards certain Genevan academics like the Aristotelian philosopher Petrus Galesius who became so hostile towards Arminius that he was forced to suspend his studies at Geneva and move to the University of Basel in the summer of 1583, a move of which the burgomasters approved. At Basel, Arminius participated in some traditional public lectures wherein mature students could present theological expositions. Whilst expounding on some chapters of the Book of Romans, Arminius caught the eye of Johannes Jacobus Grynæus, professor of sacred literature and dean of the theological faculty, quickly becoming his favourite student. Arminius was held in such high esteem by the department of theology at Basel he was offered to be divinitatis doctor, an offer which he turned down on account of his youth. (13) Grynæus nevertheless approved of Arminius so much that on the 3rd of September 1583 he wrote an open letter to the burgomasters of Amsterdam, commending him publicly:

To pious readers, greeting;

Inasmuch as a faithful testimonial of learning and piety ought not to be refused by any learned and pious man, so neither James Arminius, a native of Amsterdam, for his deportment while he attended the University of Basle was marked by piety, moderation, and assiduity in study; and very often, in the course of our theological discussions, he made his gift of a discerning spirit so manifest to all of us, as to elicit from us well-merited congratulations. More recently, too, in certain extraordinary prelections delivered with the consent, and by the order, of the Theological Faculty, in which he publicly expounded a few chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, he gave us the best ground to hope that he was destined ere long—if, indeed, he goes on to stir up the gift of God that is in him—to undertake and sustain the function of teaching, to which he may be lawfully set apart, with much fruit of the Church. I commend him, accordingly, to all good men, and, in particular, to the Church of God in the famous city of Amsterdam; and I respectfully entreat that regard may be had to that learned and pious youth, so that he may never be under the necessity of inter-

mitting theological studies which have been thus far
so happily prosecuted. Farewell! (14)

According to Grynæus' letter, Arminius pursued his studies at the University of Basel in a good and respectable manner, and his discipline regarding the study of theology was noteworthy. Grynæus also recommended him for the ministry in the Reformed Church and for future theological training, which was a significant commendation by a distinguished professor of theology which proved instrumental in and throughout Arminius' later career.

In 1583, Arminius returned to Geneva to finish his studies there. During this period of study, Arminius was significantly influenced by Charles Perrot, a professor of theology who advocated a view of theological tolerance which challenged the dogmatic attitudes of the Reformed Church of his day which he called 'popish.' He held that every Christian who holds to the fundamentals of the faith should enjoy freedom of expression such that fruitful theological dialogue may take place and the truth discerned by the Scriptures in a dispute. Perrot held that every man should enjoy his own opinion freely and entirely, and this principle influenced Arminius' thinking. After two years there, the burgomasters sent to enquire of Arminius' progress to which Theodore Beza, the head of the theological department, sent a reply on the 3rd of June 1585 expressing his hope that Arminius would continue on with rigorous theological training in conjunction with his intellect which "when consolidated by mature age and experience, will be productive of the richest fruits." Beza's letter demonstrates that Arminius was an engaged student who applied rigorous critical thinking to his theological expositions, and Arminius had a profound respect for Beza. (15)

After completing his studies at Geneva in 1586, Arminius went on a seven-month holiday to Italy with a friend named Adrian Junius, travelling first to Padua and then to Rome, where Arminius spoke of all the Papal horrors he saw. (16) Nevertheless, Arminius opponents spread rumours of his trip that he has kissed the pontiff's slipper, met with the

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Jesuits and of secretly consulted with Cardinal Bellarmine. Arminius was summoned to Amsterdam in the Autumn of 1587 by the burgomasters on account of these claims but they were all proven baseless by the letters of both Grynæus and Beza and by the testimony of Adrian Junius. Thereafter, Arminius went on a business trip to Southern Holland to also visit some relatives at the consent of the burgomasters. (17) On the 4th of February 1588, Arminius was called to the ministry in Amsterdam in fulfilment of the agreement he had made with his patrons. His duties at the Oude Kerk and the Nieuwe Kerk included conducting the prayers, giving sermons and conducting other public discourses under the watchful eyes of the elder clergy. The people found him to be such a good preacher and pious man that on the 28th of July it was proposed that Arminius should become the pastor of the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, a proposition to which all the burgomasters gave consent. Arminius accepted this vocation on the 11th of August 1588, becoming the first native Hollander to exercise full-time ministry in the Reformed Church in Amsterdam. He was twenty-nine years old. (18)

Upon pastoral ordination, Arminius began a series of sermons from the 6th of November 1588 to the 30th of September 1601 preaching through Romans and alternating with Malachi in the traditional manner of the Dutch pastors. (19) Arminius also took on various ecclesiastical roles; he was elected as secretary of the classis on the 17th of April 1589 and served as its delegate to the Particular Synod of North Holland at Hoorn on the 25th of June 1590, he was involved in civic affairs such as the reform of the Latin schools in Amsterdam, and Reformed Church authorities from other Dutch cities such as Utrecht often sent for Arminius' personal aid specifically in matters of faith practice and doctrine. Arminius also debated doctrinal challengers like Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert, a Dutch humanist and critic of Theodore Beza's strict doctrine of grace and predestination (supralapsarianism), which was a significant controversy in which Arminius attempted to find a middle-ground, saying "I believe that our salvation rests on Christ alone and that we obtain

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faith for the forgiveness of sins and the renewing of life only through the Holy Spirit,” a moderate response which brought him the respect of some and the suspicion of others. In 1592 heated discussion broke out concerning Arminius’ preaching on the seventh and ninth chapters of the Book Romans during the 1588-1601 preaching series. Some, such as Peter Plancius, an Amsterdam minister, accused him of unorthodox theological sentiments including disagreement with the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, but Arminius defended himself both exegetically and historically. This generated discussion in the Amsterdam consistory and Arminius was again required to appear before the burgomasters, his friend Uitenbogard (who now a pastor of the Reformed Church at The Hague) speaking for him. After some time of cross-examination, these accusations against Arminius were found to be unsound and the trial was adjourned with increased burgomaster support of Arminius’ pastorship and preaching, which resumed in relative peace for some time thereafter. In general, Arminius’ pastoral service and his moderation in approach to controversy won him the respect and support of both ecclesiastical and secular authorities in Amsterdam as a capable teacher of God’s Word. (20)

It was during his pastorship at the Oude Kerk that Arminius first saw Lijsbet Laurensdochter Reael, daughter of the esteemed Laurens Reael. Lijsbet, born on the 22nd of August 1566, was an educated woman from a very powerful and much respected family. Arminius and Lijsbet soon became engaged in the August of 1590, committing the traditional Red Door entrance on the 25th of August at the sacristy of the Oude Kerk as a symbol of their commitment to each other. By September that same year they were wed in the Reformed manner with Arminius’ whole congregation and the burgomasters in attendance. The couple first lived with Lijsbet’s parents at the so-called Golden Reael manor for some time, but in May of 1593 they moved into a home in the St. Ursula cloister in Amsterdam in preparation of their firstborn. There they began to build a family. Arminius had twelve children by

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Lijsbet, three of whom died in infancy: Engeltje (F) Jun. 14th 1593; Harmen (M) Dec. 24th 1594; Pieter (M) Oct. 7th 1596; Jan (M) Aug. 25th 1598; Laurens (M) May 11th 1600 (died in infancy); Laurens (M): Sep. 20th 1601; Jacob (M) Jun. 20th 1603; Willem (M) May 2nd 1605; Daniel (M) Nov. 28th 1606 and Geertruyd (F) Sep. 12th 1608. Arminius also had two other sons born in between Jacob and Willem who died in infancy. Their names are not recorded.

Arminius' marriage into the Reael family gave him a prominent civil standing in Holland, as biographer Carl Bangs writes: "By 1590 Arminius, the orphan of Oudewater, was no longer an isolated individual lacking in supportive relationships and dependent on charity. By his call to the Amsterdam ministry and marriage to Lijsbet, he was caught up in an extended work network of professional, political, economic, and family relationships which extended into every corner of the leading families of Amsterdam. More than once these relationships were to function in his favour in the turbulent years which lie ahead." (21)

Arminius' pastorship demanded much from him in addition to his family commitments, especially in 1602 when the Black Plague swept throughout the Netherlands. As the entire district of Amsterdam was consumed by the pestilence, Arminius wrote to his friend Uitenbogard of the fear he had for his family, exhorting his friend to pray for him. Arminius stepped up as a Christian leader in community during those dark days; he led Christians from everywhere around the city in public prayers and he often entered into the homes of the afflicted—rich and poor—to encourage them to persevere. Casper Brandt records that on one particular occasion Arminius passed a household in a poorer region which was completely infested with the plague. Since none would go near that house, Arminius entered at his own risk to provide water for the afflicted and to apply balm to their wounds. On other occasions, Arminius met privately with two dying Christians struggling with the assurance of their salvation, speaking words of encouragement to them that through faith they

really have peace with God in Christ. Arminius' leadership during the plague was of such testament to his Christian virtue that, as Casper Brandt writes, "his name deserves a place among those who are entitled to be held up as examples for the imitation of all ministers of the Christian Church." (22)

Whereas the plague brought suffering, it also produced opportunity in Arminius' life. For not only had it affected Amsterdam, but it also spread to other parts of Holland such as Leiden, where it killed two of the professors of theology at the university there including Lucas Trelocatius the Elder on the 28th of August and Francis Junius on the 23rd of October. This left two vacant seats open at Leiden, and many professors and ministers proposed that Arminius should be given one of them. Arminius however did not consider himself to be the best for the position and there were those who opposed such a proposal. Yet Arminius found his defenders in the Amsterdam curators and his friend Uitenbogard. Therefore, Johannes Oldenbarneveldt, the Prime Minister of Holland, called a meeting at The Hague with the Leiden Academy to discuss Arminius' eligibility. As sickness prevented Arminius from attending, Uitenbogard spoke on his behalf with Franciscus Gomarus and the Leiden faculty. Following the conference at The Hague, Gomarus conducted a private conference with Arminius to question him concerning his beliefs. Gomarus was satisfied at this meeting and on the 10th of July 1603, Jacobus Arminius was inaugurated as rector ordinarius and, particularly, divinitatis doctor, at the University of Leiden. (23)

Arminius moved with his growing family from Amsterdam to Leiden the same year he was elected. He lived in two houses across from the Pieterskerk, a short walk away from the university. Arminius' academic career involved daily lectures, private classes and also debates by which he came to be recognised as a respectable academic. Arminius also wrote much during his Leiden years including two of his most famous theological publications; On the Nature of God and the Opera Theologica, the former of which earned him the honourable

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title of rector magnificus in 1605 and the latter of which was comprised of Arminius famous academic orations, exegetical treatises on soteriology and a collection of his private and public disputations. (24) Although the Leiden divines Gomarus, Arminius and Trelcatius the Younger all agreed on the fundamentals of the Reformed Christian faith, Arminius was increasingly involved in theological controversy with Gomarus throughout 1604-1605 regarding the expression and possible review of specific articles in the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism. The disagreement became so severe such that by the 30th of August 1605 the local Synod of South Holland took note of the dispute and decreed—in agreement with Arminius—that it may be possible to review the Confession and the Catechism within certain parameters. Nevertheless, further controversy ensued such that by 1608 a conference was called between Gomarus and Arminius at The Hague where they discussed their disagreements on soteriology before the burgomasters over a series of weeks, a discussion which caught the attention of Reformed laity, Church authorities and Dutch academia. (25) During the conference Arminius suffered a bout of severe illness which forced him bed-bound at his home in Leiden, cutting the conference short on the 21st of August 1609. Gomarus and Arminius were therefore ordered by the burgomasters to put their own positions into writing with a refutation of the opposite opinion, a task which Gomarus completed but Arminius did not due to the progressive severity of his tuberculosis which now tormented him constantly through fever, coughing, respiratory difficulties, eating difficulties, sleeping difficulties, arthritis and loss of vision in his right eye. Although Arminius's physical health deteriorated, he kept up his faith and spirits and gave consolation to his wife Lijsbet by encouraging her to place her trust in God. Some of Arminius' close friends such as Johannes Uitenbogard, Adrian Borrius, Petrus Bertius and his ex-student Simon Episcopius would come to visit Arminius in his home to comfort him, discuss theology, and pray together. (26)

On Monday the 19th of October, Jacobus Arminius of Oudewater peacefully died

surrounded his wife, children and friends. He was about fifty years old. His burial took place at the Pieterskerkhof in Leiden on Thursday the 22nd of October followed by a Funerary Oration spoken by Bertius in the Great Auditorium of the University of Leiden at the request of Arminius' friends. In attendance were the burgomasters, Gomarus and other friends and relatives of Arminius from The Hague, Amsterdam and Oudewater, his hometown—including Rudolfus Snellius, his old friend from youth. It was, as Casper Brandt writes, a truly mournful loss, not only to the academy, but also to the Christian community. Thus Arminius died, old and full of years: a Christian man whose legacy lives on in the life of the Reformed Church. (27)

++ ENDNOTES & BIBLIOGRAPHY

- (1) Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), p.331. These were the sentiments of Petrus Bertius, friend of Arminius, spoken at his Funerary Oration in Leiden.
- (2) Arminius' birthdate is a point of disagreement among scholars. Brandt's late seventeenth century biography places it in 1560 (cf. *The Life of James Arminius*, 1854, p.11). Bangs in his twentieth century work however favours 1559 as the more probable date since it is nearest to the popularly held 1560 but it is also recorded by some of Arminius' bodily descendants (cf. *Arminius*, 1985, pp.25-27). October 10th which is recorded by Brandt is doubted by Bangs, but this is not a serious issue of contention. Bangs' dates are preferable due to his generally superior documentation.
- (3) Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius* (1854), pp.11-13; Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), p.26-27.
- (4) *Ibid.*, pp.13-14. Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), p.30; *The Works of James Arminius* (1996), I:ix.
- (5) Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), p.35; *The Works of James Arminius* (1996), I:ix.

- (6) *Ibid.*, I:ix-x.
- (7) Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), pp.37-38.
- (8) Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius* (1854), pp.15-16; *The Works of James Arminius* (1996), I:x.
- (9) Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), pp.28-29, 47, 49-55.
- (10) Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius* (1854), p.17.
- (11) A fuller description of Ramean Logic can be found in Carl Bangs' *Arminius* (1985), pp.56-63. Both Bangs and Brandt both allow for the possibility that Arminius took an interest in Ramism earlier than Leiden; perhaps at Marburg, when he had travelled there with Snellius whom, they posit, was a Ramist. He later abandoned that way of thought following his studies under Beza at the Geneva Academy.
- (12) Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), pp.64, 66.
- (13) *Ibid.*, pp.71-73; Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius* (1854), pp.21-22.
- (14) Signed: 'JOHN JAMES GRYNÆUS, Professor of Sacred Literature and Dean of the Theological Faculty.—Written with mine own hand. Basle, 3rd September, 1583' (cf. Casper Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius*, 1854, p.25). Notice in line five of the letter that Gryneus had mistaken Arminius for a native of Amsterdam whereas Arminius had in fact come from Oudewater.
- (15) *Ibid.*, pp.23-24. Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), pp.75-76.
- (16) Bangs explains that this probably refers to Pope Sixtus V, who during his Papal reign instituted a decree of moral reform to do away with lawlessness, which Bangs describes as: "...a reign of terror... After it began... there were more bandits' heads on the Bridge of St. Angelo than there were melons in the market." (cf. *ibid.*, p.79).
- (17) *Ibid.*, pp.26-28.
- (18) *Ibid.*, pp.29-33.

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(19) In Holland, one used to preach through an entire book of Scripture upon pastoral ordination.

(20) Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), pp.126, 128, 138-147, 153, 156.

(21) *Ibid.*, pp.130-135, 150-152, 250. Bangs also explains that this position of honour also evoked envy from other *ministers* such as Plancius which would prove harmful for Arminius later on in his academic career.

(22) Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius* (1854), pp.89-93.

(23) *Ibid.*, pp. 85-118, 135, 136-140.

(24) *The Works of James Arminius* (1996), I.xiv-xvi. Arminius' *Opera Theologica* is preserved within *The Works of James Arminius* today. The *Opera* was composed at Leiden but largely published posthumously.

(25) Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius* (1854), pp.161-169, 182-183, 194-199, 214-219.

(26) *Ibid.*, p.294, 297-299; Carl Bangs, *Arminius* (1985), pp.327-328.

(27) Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius* (1854), p.299.

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