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Gottfried Erhard Feßken and Nature's Calls to Repentance

Abstract

Gottfried Erhard Feßken was a seventeenth century ecclesiastic who used as the subject of his sermons various unusual natural phenomena of his times: the appearance of comets, earthquake, locust, and severe storms. He was primarily interested in the spiritual aspect of these phenomena seeing them as sent by God mainly as a punishment for sins and as warning signs to bring people to repentance.

Keywords: Gottfried Erhard Feßken, Physico-theology, Sin.

Gottfried Erhard Feßken i wezwanie przyrody do pokuty

Abstrakt

Gottfried Erhard Feßken był siedemnastowiecznym duchownym, który jako temat swoich kazań wykorzystywał różne niezwykle zjawiska przyrodnicze swoich czasów: pojawienie się komet, trzęsienie ziemi, szarańczę i silne burze. Interesował go przede wszystkim duchowy aspekt tych zjawisk, widząc je jako zesłane przez Boga głównie jako kara za grzechy i znaki ostrzegawcze, mające doprowadzić ludzi do pokuty.

Słowa kluczowe: Gottfried Erhard Feßken, fizyko-teologia, grzech.

Gottfried Erhard Feßken (1632–before 1696) was in 1660–1663 a pastor in Langennaundorf in Brandenburg, and then, in 1663–1695, in Zinna, now part of Torgau in Saxony, and in Welsau near Torgau.¹ As he was fairly well-educated, his writings are replete with quotations in Latin, even from the Scripture, and he often referred to writings of classical authors and of theologians and scien-

¹ *Pfarrerbuch der Kirchenprovinz Sachsen*. Vol. 3. 2005. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 23; also, title pages of Feßken's books.

tists of his times. He saw nature as a manifestation of God's wisdom and power and natural events as the manifestation of His will concerning the spiritual state of humans. Through these events, God spoke to people to bring them to His fold, in particular, through rare and frightful phenomena.

1. Lightning and thunder

The accepted opinion in Feßken's times was that lightning was sulfuric and warm, very dry saltpeteric vapor rising from the ground which in the air was cooled down and pressed together to be enflamed and seen as fire and heard as thunder because of the violent splitting of clouds and was seen before it was heard since light travels much quicker than sound.² In his view, lightning was 1. a sign of the divine majesty (19); 2. an instrument of divine wrath (20), an admonition that God wants to bring damage as punishment (21–22); and 3. a sign of God's goodness since it was used to defend believers against their enemies, also, to bring people to conversion (26–27), and to provide help as in the case of Peter's deliverance from prison (Acts 12:7). A natural phenomenon as it is, lightning has also a mystical/figurative meaning; it signifies: 1. the coming of Christ in the body in the fullness of times (31); 2. the spiritual coming of Christ in His Word and sacraments; and 3. the majestic coming of Christ (32). Christ compared the Gospel to lightning because of its speed of spreading and of the universality (33), and so, "just as lightning suddenly comes before the thunder, so the lightning of the Gospel has shone through the entire world in such a way that no one can have an excuse." Lightning should also remind people about the last judgment because of common elements: lightning comes from clouds and Christ will come from above; both these events are sudden (35); both are very visible (36); and both are frightening (37). If this is not enough, thunders also have an allegorical/spiritual meaning: God's word is compared to the thunder 1. because of its inciting fear, 2. because of its power (79), and 3. because of its usefulness: the word makes the heart fruitful the way thunder makes soil fruitful (80).

To protect themselves from harmful consequences of the lightning, people should 1. go to church; 2. pray ardently (40); 3. lead a pure life, do good works; and 4. always be ready to repent of their sins (41).

² Gottfried Erhard Feßken. 1679. *Des Grossen Wunderthätigen Gottes wohl betrachtungs-würdige Wunder in der Natur, Als unter andern fürnehmlich sind: Der feurige helleuchtende Blitz, Der hartknallende Donner, Und der subtile leicht-durchdringende Strahl-Geist, Sammt denen wunderbar-zusammen gebackenen Donner-Keilen, zu einer Christlichen Buß-erweckenden Betrachtung.* Leipzig: Justinus Branden, 16; this definition is a translation from the Latin text given on the margin, but the source is not provided, which is Daneau Lambert. 1580. *Physice Christiana, sive, Christiana de rerum creaturarum natura.* Vol. 2. Genevae: Eustathius Vignon, 50. Hereafter, page numbers are indicated in parentheses.

As a physical phenomenon, lightning comes together with thunder. God is the principal efficient cause of thunders. Natural causes are secondary; they are: the dust of the ground and the heat and coldness of air opposing one another causing a thundering sound (51–52, 61). Nefarious spiritual forces can also be at play; however, the devil cannot do more damage than God allows, since the devil is but God's dog kept on a chain (55). The devil can predict bad weather from physical phenomena and he speaks to witches and wizards so that they can pretend they cause bad weather, thereby strengthening people's superstition (56–57).

Why do thunders exist? Theologians call thunder the voice of God (114), and thus, 1. thunders are the testimony of the existence of God (63); 2. signs of God's majesty (65); 3. instruments of God's wrath (67); but they also are 4. an expression of God's goodness: thunderous weather may enhance the fertility of the soil since "the earth is moved by the thunder, and the pores or sweat-holes of the earth are opened up, so that afterwards everything greens and grows all the more lovingly and gracefully" (71). Christians 1. should appreciate thunders as they make people think of God (72); 2. they should not apply superstitious means to avert thunderous weather; 3. they should do penance and pray earnestly (76), and 4. they should submit to the will of God even in the prospect of impending death (78).

A rather loosely related with lightnings and thunders is the problem of stones falling from the sky. Feßken subscribed to the then accepted theory of the existence of a lapidifying juice (*succus lapidescens* or *spiritus lapidificus* [88]) omnipresent in earth, water, and air, which could turn vapors into stones which were then hurled to the ground. An example of such a phenomenon were thunder-stones (*Donner-Keile*), believed to have been vapors petrified in clouds (88). The theological reason for the existence of stones falling from the sky is that they are a manifestation of God's incomprehensible wisdom (99) and justice (101); also, they are divinely used to punish a wide array of sins: blasphemers (102), those who curse (103), idolaters (105), the superstitious (106), persecutors of Christians, tyrants and enemies of people (107), those who rejoice because of people's misfortunes, drunkards, gamblers (108), bickerers, troublemakers, womanizers (110), thieves (112), and those who ignore storms (115) since they, effectively, ignore God's speaking to them through the storm.

2. Comets

Feßken also turned his eyes high to the sky, which was motivated by an appearance of a comet in 1680 and 1681.³ Generally, celestial bodies have been always a source of fascination and awe. Celestial bodies are 1. “the document of the divine existence, a sufficient proof that surely a God must be in heaven who made or created everything so wonderfully and magnificently, even exceedingly artfully, wisely, and orderly” (7); 2. “the instruments of the divine grace and wrath” (9); and 3. the signs of the approaching end of the world and the last judgment (10). As observed by “optical tubes”, comets are stars, which is indicated by their form and circular course; they are not always visible as regular stars; they are extraordinary stars created to announce important events, “real repentance-sermons set on the high pulpit of heaven” (13). Tycho de Brahe thought that seeds (*Saam*) of comets were put at the time of the creation of the world in the Milky Way galaxy (20), which matured in time and were released through their “inner drive” (21). As everything else, comets were created for the glory of God and for the good of humans (24); for the glory of the divine truth; to confirm the truth of the Scripture that speaks about God giving signs in heaven (26); and as a manifestation of the goodness and mercy of God who like a father shows his children the rod as warning before He uses it (27), thereby giving them an opportunity for repentance (75). And thus, comets are frightening signs aimed at those who neglect God’s ways (29), they are pulling-away signs to pull people away from the affairs of the world to raise their hearts to heaven, and they are also signs of trusting encouragement to look forward to the approaching salvation in the days of last judgment (30). Comets are usually prophets signifying “the enflamed wrath of God over the evil of men, which is already blazingly burning, and whose severe punishment is near at the door” to awake in human hearts true repentance and the desire to correct one’s ways (38). History shows that comets seldom mean anything good (39), since they were portents of 1. fierce storms and devastating weather (40); 2. earthquakes (41); 3. floods (42); 4. food shortages and hunger (43); 5. wars (45); 6. pestilence (47); 7. the death or downfall of monarchs or VIPs (48); 8. a change of political power (50); 9. fires (51); and 10. the dying off of domestic animals (52). However, the meaning of the then recent comet could not be known with certainty (56). Some predictions of some people based on sign in the sky succeeded, but this is not a general rule since there were countless examples of erroneous predictions (88). Therefore, people should look at God as the Lord of celestial bodies, not at these bodies as idolaters do (90)

³ Gottfried Erhard Feßken. 1682. *Κομητηλογία sacra. Oder theologische und historische Comets-Betrachtung*. Leipzig: Justinus Branden.

and regardless of what God has in store for people, they should turn to God with repented hearts (59), since upon people's conversion a looming disaster can be averted (61). In all this, people should be spiritually awake, which includes 1. moderation in eating and drinking not to burden the heart (Lk. 21:34) (68); 2. ardent and constant prayer to be ready for the coming of Christ; 3. prudence to be exercised to avoid life's dangers and temptations (69); and 4. the abandonment of the false sense of security (70). Most importantly, people should do penance that includes the recognition of one's sins followed by contrition and regret for these sins (101), the confession of sins (102), and then by correcting one's life and perseverance in the pious life (103).

3. Earthquakes

Alarmed by the then recent, 1690 earthquake, Feßken stated that an earthquake "surely does not mean anything good and such a rare phenomenon should not be lightly dismissed or treated as a mere natural event, but it should be understood that the hidden God had meant thereby something special."⁴ God is the great ruler of the world, the first or principal cause of earthquakes; however, usually God uses natural means as His helpers. And as natural phenomena, earthquakes result from thick sulfuric or saltpeteric vapors gathered in underground caverns and then seeking a violent outlet, thereby shaking the ground. These vapors manifest themselves through warm underground water or through "fire-spewing mountains" (12).

Earthquakes are the manifestation of the divine omnipotence (15); in comparison with that power, the mightiest monarchs are like earthworms and scared insects. Earthquakes point to the divine inscrutable wisdom that created this world out of four elements so wondrously that earthquakes can take place; they indicate the divine justice when God punishes sinners (16); but they also show the divine goodness since not everything is destroyed (17) and when some lives are spared (18). The hardened hearts of people are softened by earthquakes leading to their conversion and "when not always the temporary, then the eternal salvation of their souls is preserved" (20). Christians should see earthquakes as real repentance preachers through which God calls people to repentance. They are signs and heralds of the last judgment when the earth will be turned into pure nothingness (21), to the time of which no one knows, but God alone. Earthquakes are also signs and heralds of the incoming disaster: war, hunger, or pestilence

⁴ Gottfried Erhard Feßken. 1691. *Sieben historisch- und theologische Abhandlungen von Erdbeben*. [Leipzig], 5.

(31); however, only God knows what particular disaster will follow. As to the most recent earthquake, there was a war at that time in the Holy Roman Empire; the Turks and the French waged war against noble Germany, therefore, pestilence and shortages were very likely to follow (36). Thus, without delay, people should turn to God asking for mercy, as true repentance and sincere prayer are the best means to prevent the approaching woes from coming (37).⁵

4. Locusts

Prompted by the then recent appearance of locusts in many European places and the damage they caused, Feßken made the locust a topic of one of his sermons.⁶ God uses nature to His ends, so that nature is not an assistant, but an obedient servant to accomplish something, and locusts are one such means: they multiply themselves in a natural way in some place and then move at God's command to another ([8]). The reason for the existence of locusts is largely punitive and locusts, God's rod, are an expression of God's wrath ([10]). The wrath is caused by 1. the neglect of Sundays and treating them as any other day; 2. the misuse of God's gifts and ingratitude for daily bread ([11]); and 3. the mistreatment of neighbors and prideful trust in one's own strength and riches ([12]). Locusts are also a warning about an imminent general punishment of the land, and the history shows that the appearance of locust "never meant anything good, and it was always followed by severe punishments and plagues" ([14]). And so, an unusual number of locusts means 1. an approaching land-devastating war ([15]); 2. a horrible pestilence/epidemic ([17]); 3. the dying off of cattle ([18]); 4. severe shortages and hunger ([19]); and 5. the presence of false religious teachers ([20]). However, at the end, only God knows what particular punishment will follow the recent appearance of locusts ([21]), but the upcoming disaster can be averted by sincere prayer to the triune God in heaven along with genuine repentance as the most wholesome way to deter the approaching punishment ([23]).

Frightful as an onslaught of locusts can be, there are some upsides. First, people can learn something from them. Ants, locusts, and spiders are considered wiser than sages (Prov. 30:24-27). From locusts people can learn 1. the praiseworthy obedience to God as locusts do God's bidding at His command ([26]); 2. the orderliness and harmony as exercises in their ranks ([27]); 3. the loyalty and love

⁵ See also Rienk Vermij. 2021. *Thinking on earthquakes in early modern Europe: firm beliefs on shaky ground*. London: Routledge, 209–210.

⁶ Gottfried Erhard Feßken. 1693. *Gottes des Herrn Zebaoth bedenckliches Heuschrecken-Heer, welches neulichster Zeit hier und da, in- und ausserhalb Landes, sich in ungewöhnlicher Menge hat sehen lassen*. Leipzig: Friedrich Lanckischen Erben, there is no pagination.

of the fatherland ([28]). Secondly, as then believed, smoked locust was good for those with the urination problem ([5]). Moreover, locusts could serve as food for the poor ([6]).

5. Storms

Violent storms in 1693 became a topic of Fußken's preaching.⁷ This is about winds that God uses as bells calling to repentance ([6]). As to the natural aspect of winds, they are thought to be a mist rising from the ground which strikes through air with some noise ([7]). They are exhalations of the earth and their strength depends on whether "it pleases the Almighty God to release locked up winds from their prison of the earth," which is accomplished through angels (Rev. 7) ([8]), who, on God's command, let winds go or stop them. God created winds at the beginning of time (Amos 4:14) probably on the third day ([9]). The devil who lives in air (Eph. 2:2) can use elements to his devices. Witches and wizards ([11]) admitted that they can use winds and weather ([12]). However, of himself, the devil can do nothing; his power is controlled by the power of God who keeps him on a leash ([13]). It is because God uses evil caused by the devil to turn it into something good.

Winds have been created to show God's majesty ([14]), His wisdom in the way winds circulate, His goodness in the way winds benefit humans, and His power in the way winds can affect nature and humans, often destructively ([15]). Winds also benefit humans: 1. by purifying air by dispersing harmful fogs and moisture which could lead to an infestation by worms/microorganisms; 2, by clarifying air by dispersing dark fogs ([16]); 3. by refreshing tired humans and enlivening withering plants; 4. by enhancing the fertility of soil which "after the unfriendly winter becomes fruitful, pleasant, and joyous"; and 5. by enabling ship navigation ([17]).

On the natural level, sailors speak about 32 kinds of winds ([18]), but Feßken was more interested in the theological aspect of such classification. In his opinion, there are 1. natural winds which can cause an earthquake when they are not released from underground; 2. the winds of divine mercy; such winds dried the land after the flood; 3. winds of divine wrath; such a wind brought locust to Egypt ([22]); and 4. reminding winds; such winds cause some damage to wake people up from the slumber of sin to call them to repentance ([23]). Particularly strong, unusual winds can be 1. storm-bells by which a rebellion and damaging riot are

⁷ Gottfried Erhard Feßken. 1694. *Des Grossen Welt-Monarchens und Majestätischen Königes aller Könige Buß-Glocke*. Wittenberg: Martin Schultze, there is no pagination.

announced ([27]); 2. war-bells ([28]); 3. victory-bells ([30]); 4. fire-bells before consuming fire befalls some location ([36]); 5. death-bells announcing the approaching death of a monarch or some VIP ([34]), and 6. judgment-bells warning about approaching last judgment ([36]).

There are several things which should be kept in mind when a storm hits: 1. the wonderful rule of God who releases winds from underground for them to make as much damage as commanded by God who can at any moment still them by His word (Mt. 8:27); 2. the spiritual rebirth promised by Christ, since the world is a sea and faith is the ship with people of all nations in which Christ is the helmsman ([37–39]); 3. the state of the church and of the human life where the church is a ship on which the winds of persecution blow; and 4. the future resurrection when a wind brings people to life like illustrated in Ezekiel's vision ([40]). Most of all, winds should be viewed as the repentance-bell calling people to repentance ([43]) and as prayer-bell calling people to pray and ask God for mercy ([45]).

6. Repent!

When all these writings are put side by side, there is a great deal of repetition, almost to the point of self-plagiarism. On the other hand, these writings have been published over the span of 15 years, thus, these repetitions can be considered marks of consistency of Feßken's views.

As Feßken stated, many things are created for punishment: winds, fire, hail, hunger, death, animals such as scorpions, snakes, locust, war⁸, whereby one theme prominently emerges, the divine punishment through the means of the variety of natural phenomena. Destructive as these phenomena can be, they may also be omens of something more destructive yet, more punishing, more insidiously affecting the lives of individuals and societies. However, for Feßken as an ecclesiastic deeply concerned about his flock, the punishment is what he speaks about with sadness, since he would want people to treat the phenomena very seriously to prevent the disasters they presage from happening in the future and he saw one way of accomplishing it, namely through repentance. This is clearly marked with the prominent references to repentance (Buße) beginning with the subtitles of his writings where he referred to the natural phenomena he described as *Buß-Glocke*, *Buß-Prediger*, *Buß-Wecker*, and his writings to be *Buß-erweckende*.

Feßken spoke about the religious significance of five different natural phenomena, which was partially motivated by contemporary events, but, as he au-

⁸ Feßken. 1693. *Gottes des Herrn Zebaoth*, Introduction, [1].

thored his publication at the closing of the 17th century, we can also attribute it to his sensitivity to the nascent natural sciences. They had already made their mark in theology in the way that the latter enlisted sciences to its cause, which is reflected in the budding theological paradigm called physico-theology. Physico-theology attempted to prove the existence of God and His attributed from the makeup of the physical reality and its various domains, which flourished in the 18th century. So, it is interesting to see that Feßken's interest in earthquakes would become its own domain as sismo-theology⁹, thunders and lightnings would become the topic of bronto-theology¹⁰, locusts of akrido-theology¹¹, and comets would be folded into cosmo-theology¹² or astro-theology¹³; in fact, terminologically, Feßken's kometologia/cometology can easily be turned into cometo-theology. There are some traces of physico-theological thinking in Feßken when he spoke about some phenomena pointing to the existence of God. However, that was very rare. For Feßken, the existence of God was a given rather than the point to be proven, although more often he used the references to natural phenomena as testimonies of the divine attributes: His power, wisdom, and goodness; surely: His justice exercised punitively by directing the natural phenomena – directly or indirectly.

The natural world was for Feßken a rather weak starting point to settle theological issues, which can be seen in the full force in his proof of the immortality of the soul. In his account, the soul is immortal since the Scripture clearly states it; and there are many scriptural examples, particularly Enoch, and then Elias and Moses speaking with Christ. When he turned to what he called firm rational arguments, the argument was from creation: the soul originated in God as an invisible and immortal spirit; what is created in the image of God is immortal, like God and this immortality, as a piece of this image, remained in the soul after the fall.¹⁴

⁹ Johann Samuel Preu. 1772. *Versuch einer Sismotheologie, oder physikalisch-theologische Betrachtungen über die Erdbeben*. Nördlingen: Karl Gottlob Becken.

¹⁰ Peter Ahlwardt. 1745. *Bronto-Theologie: vernunftliche und theologische Betrachtungen über den Blitz und Donner, wodurch der Mensch zur wahren Erkenntnis Gottes und seiner Vollkommenheiten, wie auch zu einem tugendhaften Leben und Wandel geführt werden kann*. Greifswalde – Leipzig: Johann Jacob Weitbrecht.

¹¹ Ernst Ludewig Rathlef. 1748–1750. *Akridotheologie oder historische und theologische Betrachtungen über die Heuschrecken*. Hannover: Johann Christoph Richter.

¹² Johann Gottlieb Walpurger. 1748–1754. *Cosmotheologische Betrachtungen derer wichtigsten Wunder und Wahrheiten im Reiche der Natur und Gnaden zur Verherrlichung ihres glorwürdigsten Urhebers zur Beschämung des Unglaubens und zur allgemeinen Erbauung*. Chemnitz: Johann David Stöbel.

¹³ W[illiam] Derham. 1714. *Astro-theology, or, a demonstration of the being and attributes of God from a survey of the heavens*. London: W. Innys; it was also translated into German as *Astrotheologie* in 1732.

¹⁴ Gottfried Erhard Feßken. 1687. *Das durch Jesu Christi allerheiligstes Blut hochtheuer-erkaufftes und unvergleichliches Guth menschlicher Seelen*. Wittenb[erg]: Mart[in] Schultze, 108–116.

In other words, these rational proofs are based on the veracity of the Biblical account. The latter is thus the foundation of Feßken's proofs and rationality lies in using judiciously Biblical statements. Also, what is natural is still mixed together with the supernatural as seen in Feßken's naturalist explanation of the power of the exhalations of the earth being kept in check by angels. That is, the physical reality is saturated with the spiritual reality. Again, Feßken made it clear when speaking about the transition of the soul from the body in the moment of death. Does the soul of a believer have to travel far to reach the presence of God? Not really. The soul, as a spiritual entity, is not bound by space and time. There is no physical distance it has to travel, as Augustine had already said, it finds itself immediately after death in the company of angels and of other spirits and "enjoys immediately the kingdom of heaven which consist of seeing God", since God is everywhere present and where is God there is heaven; and so, even in this earthly life the soul is close to God and His angels in heaven and His heavenly kingdom is justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit around us. So, a believer is already in the choir of angels, but the body prevents him from seeing it.¹⁵ And thus, the body has to do its best to see through the veil of natural phenomena the ultimate reality inside of which, as it were, nature is wrapped. Nature is but a trusty servant¹⁶ that follows the divine bidding and people should recognize the natural phenomena as the perceptible way in which God is speaking to them.

Spiritual message was most important for Feßken and the revelation was the leading light to him. However, in the ascendance of scientific research, he saw also some theological merit in referring to the results of this research. And thus, he was weaving into his messages these results, treating them as of secondary importance, but he was one of many ecclesiastics who paved the way to putting the book of nature and the book of revelation on more or less equal footing and theologically using the former to a much greater extent than it was offered by his contemporaries.

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¹⁵ Feßken. 1687. *Das durch Jesu*, 220–223, 226.

¹⁶ Feßken. 1679. *Des Grossen Wunderthätigen Gottes*, 17.

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