

EARTHQUAKE, SIN, AND JOHN SHOWER

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“THE earthquake,” writes a present-day geologist, “is one of the mysterious natural phenomena, mysterious because of lack of knowledge and for no other reason.”¹ How much more mysterious was “the earths violent cough” (Thomas Fuller’s metaphor)² in times before the birth of scientific geology when public calamities were pronounced “mixed fatalities,” divine judgments supported by natural causes. The tracts inspired by the London earthquake of April 6, 1580, seem to have been unanimously medieval in their interpretation of it, as were, with a few startling exceptions, discussions of the causes of the Great Plague of 1665 and the Fire of 1666.

But the new scientific spirit of the late seventeenth century was soon to challenge that view. On September 8, 1692, the southeastern counties of England and parts of the Continent were shaken by an earthquake of unknown epicenter.³ News recently received of the tremendous earthquake in Jamaica heightened the universal consternation, which is vividly present in a letter from Sir Edmund King to Sir Charles Lyttelton, concluding: “. . . all pray God to keep off the judgments we have deserv’d.”⁴ But the shock did not recur, and people congratulated themselves: “God be praised,” reported *The London Gazette*,⁵ “we do not hear of any Damage it hath done.” And an occasional thinker was rejecting the “mixed fatality” doctrine: the otherwise conventionally pious lawyer Sir John Bramston confided to his private journal: “. . . I look not on them [earthquakes]

¹ William Bowie, “Causes and Prediction of Earthquakes,” *In Honor of the Ninetieth Birthday of Charles Frederick Johnson*, Odell Shepard and Arthur Adams, ed. (Hartford, Conn.: Trinity College, 1928), p. 239.

² *A Pisgah-sight of Palestine* (1650), p. 24.

³ Charles Davison, *A History of British Earthquakes* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1924), p. 349.

⁴ *Correspondence of the Family of Hatton*, Edward M. Thompson, ed. (Camden Soc., 1878), II, 184.

⁵ Sept. 12, 1692, no. 2800.

as judgments from God, but as proceeding from naturall causes."⁶ The empirical outlook had come into conflict with traditionalism.

Of the speculative writing evoked by this event,⁷ the scientific was naturally the boldest. In trying to allay fear of approaching Doomsday, John Ray declared: ". . . the Changes that have hitherto happened in the Earth by Earthquakes, have not been so considerable as to threaten a Dissolution of the present System of the Terraqueous Globe, should there be a like Succession of them to Eternity."⁸ John Flamsteed departed even further from religious terrorizing by limiting his investigation of earthquakes to natural causes and ignoring the supernatural.⁹ A certain "C. H." attempted to reassure the public in still another way. After accepting the famous Thomas Burnet's superbly imaginative hypothesis on the causes of earthquakes,¹⁰ he alluded disdainfully to "Astrological Vanities" and affirmed that if the recent quake portended anything at all, it was merely that "as we had a long calm and serenity of Weather after it; so a lasting Peace and Tranquillity will be settled [*sic*] in the World, by the Conduct and Victorious Arms of *KING WILLIAM*, Whom God long preserve."¹¹ Such cool-headed appraisal of the mysterious by the scientists should have benefited a public given to investing in earthquake pills!¹²

Meanwhile the preachers remained essentially "Gothic" in their opinions on earthquakes. A number of them, who may as well be nameless, held that quakes betokened the aging of the world and the imminence of Doomsday. The majority of these well-intentioned English compeers of Habakkuk Mucklewrath remained mostly in the medieval world of thought. One scolded a backsliding generation for thirty-five pages, cited with unqualified approval prophet-denunciators from Gildas to Andrewes, and warned against atheists who "will by no means believe that there are any such things as *Prod-*

⁶ Quoted *Notes and Queries*, 3 ser., I (1862), 94.

⁷ "J. D. R. French Minister" testified to the amount of it in his Preface to *The Earth Twice Shaken Wonderfully; or, an Analogical Discourse of Earthquakes* (1694).

⁸ *Three Physico-Theological Discourses* (1692), 4th ed. (1721), p. 281.

⁹ *A Letter concerning Earthquakes, Written in the Year 1693* (1750, reprinted after the two London shocks of that year).

¹⁰ For a full account of this and other early ideas on earthquakes see Katharine B. Collier, *Cosmogonies of Our Fathers* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1934), pt. ii, chap. vi.

¹¹ *A Philosophical Discourse of Earthquakes: Occasioned by the Late Earthquake, September the 8th. 1692* (1693), p. 31.

¹² See Addison in *The Tatler*, Oct. 21, 1710, no. 240.

igies and *Portentous Indications*.”¹³ Another underscored the coincidences that September 8 was the anniversary of the fall of Jerusalem to Vespasian and that plague, fire, and earthquake all had struck London in various Septembers.¹⁴ Yet both writers advocated following a middle course between credulity and its opposite.

A much more intelligent and sympathetic seeker of the middle way was John Shower (1657-1715), the *raison d'être* of this paper. This nonconformist divine, son of a wealthy Exeter merchant, was a popular preacher in London sufficiently important to receive two columns in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The erudition, originality,¹⁵ and genuine but restrained emotion evident in his sermons should still command respect. The Rutgers Library fortunately possesses Shower's *Practical Reflections on the Late Earthquakes in Jamaica, England, Sicily, Malta, &c. Anno 1692. With a Particular, Historical Account of Those, and Divers Other Earthquakes* (1693). It is the best piece of theological writing occasioned by the earthquake of 1692 that I have encountered. It devotes over two hundred pages to scholarly description of all recorded earthquakes, beginning with that of Atlantis, along with conservative exegesis. Seen in the light of the works we have just examined, it impresses by its moderate tone, strong but easy style, and deep though not too obvious emotion.

Shower belongs, then, with the comparatively moderate thinkers. “*Our great Difficulty in reflecting on such Providences,*” he writes, “*will be to avoid the two Extreams, of Atheism on the one hand, and Superstition on the other; not to make too little, or too much of such Events.*”¹⁶ Accordingly he deplores the signification drawn from the earthquake by “C. H.” The main purpose behind Shower's circumstantial accounts of all the earthquakes mentioned in biblical, classical, medieval, and modern sources is to provoke his countrymen “*Thankfully to own our publick National Mercies, while other Countries are made Desolate.*”¹⁷ Being the chosen and privileged, the

¹³ *A Practical Discourse on the Late Earthquakes, with an Historical Account of Prodigious and Their Various Effects. By a Reverend Divine* (1692), p. 25.

¹⁴ Thomas Doolittle, *Earthquakes Explained and Practically Improved: Occasioned by the Late Earthquake on Sept. 8. 1692. in London, Many Other Parts in England, and beyond Sea* (1693), sigg. A₂- [A₂^v].

¹⁵ E.g., he was among the first to find beauty and wonder in the winter season and to exclaim over the shapes of snow crystals (*Winter Meditations; or, A Sermon concerning Frost and Snow, and Winds, &c. and the Wonders of God Therein* [1695]).

¹⁶ P. vii.

¹⁷ P. ix.

British must show themselves worthy of such favor by heeding "the Warning he gives us, by the Calamities of *others*,"¹⁸ while there is yet time. Shower approves Bacon's suggestion¹⁹ of a "*Historia Nemeseos*," "a Judicious, Impartial, and well-attested History of the Divine Vengeance, containing the most remarkable Monuments of God's Justice in the World."²⁰ For not Christians only but heathen, and not only the Greeks and Romans but "the *Celtæ*, a barbarous People,"²¹ have feared earthquakes as signs of divine anger. Therefore we should be fearful though public calamities have been diverted from us to such a degree "as to make us even the Wonder of the World";²² we should refrain from censuring the victims of divine wrath as necessarily more sinful than we and from speculating "concerning *their Eternal State*, who are cut off by some temporal Judgment";²³ and above all we should not "be too curious in prying into the Secrets of Providence."²⁴ We in Britain have had more than sufficient warning; let us expect the worst, act accordingly, and thereby yet avert a judgment. Shower enumerates public disasters that he considers imminent but in a reasonable and reasoning manner that contrasts with the professional prophet style of the Fire preachers and of so many of his contemporaries. He calls upon us to remark the recent earthquakes in various parts of the world, which, along with certain signs in the heavens and the current wars, suggest "the Appearance of some great Things to be ushered in."²⁵ Just consider the example of Jamaica, where devastation followed hard upon "Forewarning by a Trembling of the Earth,"²⁶ as well as those of Sicily and Malta, all the more since England herself has experienced a number of premonitory quakes recorded in medieval chronicles and modern histories. And then observe our fashionable sins, including "bare-fac'd *Deism*, with the Rejection of *Christianity*, and all *Revealed Religion*."²⁷ The longer we go unrepentant and permit signs of God's indignation at us to multiply, the more terrible will prove the ultimate judgment.

Yet in presenting all this, Shower abstained from merely delivering a tirade in the manner of those "weak *Enthusiasts* and *Visionaries*" who were "apt to imagine *God Almighty* every whit as

¹⁸ P. 33.

¹⁹ *The Advancement of Learning*, bk. II, chap. xi.

²⁰ P. 39.

²¹ P. 65.

²² P. 74.

²³ P. 89.

²⁴ P. 86.

²⁵ P. 123.

²⁶ P. 129.

²⁷ P. 151.

frequently interposing his Miraculous Power. . . as in the Days of *Moses*, . . . or of *Christ*. . . ."²⁸ For he knew God in the New Testament as well as in the Old and described His kindness contending with His anger, His mercy against His justice, His incredible patience with the English manifested in warning after warning. The righteous, he assured his readers, have nothing to dread: ". . . in Cases of Danger, *our Strength is to sit still*. Not in opposition to the use of *Means* for our Safety, for that is the *Duty* of every Man in his place: But in opposition to Reliance on any other Help than God. . . ."²⁹

So runs Shower's argument, quaint, learned, kindly, and shrewd. The man was no fool. The late Professor George Lyman Kittredge liked to observe: "Your great-great-grandfather may have believed in witches, but you couldn't have cheated him in a horse trade." Indeed the coexistence of science and superstition in modern times is a fascinating subject. Men's minds remained "Gothic" long after John Shower had been laid in his last bed to await the trump of Doom.

²⁸ [Richard Wooley,] *The Compleat Library; or, News for the Ingenious* (1692), I, 406.

²⁹ Shower, *op. cit.*, p. 195.