


Celestial Wonders in
Reformation Germany
Ken Kurihara



Number 13

CELESTIAL WONDERS
IN REFORMATION GERMANY

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BY

Ken Kurihara

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INTRODUCTION: CELESTIAL WONDERS, CONFESSIONAL CONFLICTS AND APOCALYPTICISM

The Topic: *Wunderzeichen*

In sixteenth-century Germany, *Wunderzeichen* ('wonder-signs') could signify all kinds of wondrous phenomena observed in nature. According to Michaela Schwegler, the category of *Wunderzeichen* includes wonders that appeared in the sky, wonders related to grains (the raining of corn, or the miraculous finding of grains), wonders related to blood (the raining of blood, or blood which appeared in springs), and other kinds of mysterious incidents such as encounters with angels, prophetic children, ghostly apparitions and resurrections of the dead.¹ Hiob Fincel's *Wunderzeichen* (1556), the pioneer of early modern books on wonders, includes not only these phenomena but also monstrous births, urban fires, natural disasters and terrible murders. However, in many cases the term *Wunderzeichen* was used to signify unusual celestial phenomena: comets, irregular movements of the sun and the moon (such as eclipses and halo phenomena), novae, *Fewerzeichen* (the Northern Lights), and apparitions of various strange objects such as rods (*Rute*), crosses, funeral processions, Christ, angels, armies of soldiers, and animals. In this study, my focus is limited to these wonders that appeared in the sky. People in Lutheran Germany in the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries showed great interest in these phenomena, and the sheer number of prints concerning strange celestial signs published during this period suggests their enormous popularity. Gustav Hellmann lists nearly four hundred titles (including reprints) of celestial *Wunderzeichen* broadsheets and tracts which appeared between 1550 and 1599.² Yet these pieces are only a portion of the literature on this topic. If we add all the contemporary books and sermons which discuss celestial phenomena as divine wonders, this number must be doubled.

Broadsheets and Clerical Literature

Our general images of *Wunderzeichen* are largely based on the woodcut illustrations printed on broadsheets because many of them are available in modern published collections of German *Einblattdruck* (broadsheets) and a number are also printed in various books on early modern European culture. Thanks to the collections compiled by Bruno Weber,³ Walter L. Strauss,⁴ Dorothy Alexander (in collaboration with W. L. Strauss),⁵ Wolfgang Harms (and his collaborators),⁶ Christina Hofmann-Randall⁷ and Axel Janeck (the exhibition catalogue of the Germanisches Museum in Nuremberg),⁸ more than one hundred examples of *Wunderzeichen* broadsheets can be seen even without visiting the libraries in Zurich and Gotha, both known for their large collections of *Einblattdruck*. The illustrations in these prints, vividly depicting the dramatic appearance of strange phenomena and the bewilderment of the people seeing them, are eye-catching and stimulating. It is understandable that a number of studies in *Wunderzeichen* have used these illustrated broadsheets as primary sources.⁹

Yet constructing one's analysis solely based on these broadsheets contains several dangers. Since a broadsheet has only one page and much space is occupied by the illustration, the length of the attached texts is limited, and in many cases the texts do not contain much information about the circumstances of publication and the authors' intentions. Furthermore, the contents and the narrative style of these texts show remarkable similarity to each other because many are simply following an established format. Of course, we can grasp the general trend of *Wunderzeichen* literature based on these texts: fear of God's wrath and the imminent coming of the Last Judgement echo through almost all the *Wunderzeichen* broadsheets. However, to 'decipher' the specific meaning of each broadsheet, caution is needed; unless one examines the context of each print carefully, his or her analysis can easily fall into wild guessing.

This does not mean that we should avoid using broadsheets as sources. Alexandra Walsham rightly points out that the strange visions which people saw in the sky merit more attention because they 'provide us with a unique glimpse of their deepest fear and anxieties'.¹⁰ Illustrations on broadsheets which depict these apparitions can serve as important 'windows' into the minds of the people in early modern Europe. Nevertheless, one should note that it is essential to examine the context of each *Wunderzeichen* report carefully and to consult with other primary source genres.

Indeed, broadsheets are only a part of *Wunderzeichen* literature. Sixteenth-century people also discussed these strange phenomena in *Flugschrift* (news pamphlets), *Wunderbuch* (wonder books), astrological tracts, sermons, devotional books, scientific works and personal letters. Among these, one type of source received the particular attention of scholars: *Wunderbuch*, the catalogues

of *Wunderzeichen* news compiled by Hiob Fincel, Conrad Lycsothenes, Caspar Goltwurm and others. These works, which first appeared in the 1550s, immediately won great popularity among Lutheran readers and shaped the direction for the later development of *Wunderzeichen* discourses. Several articles have been written to analyse the contents and the sources of these *Prodigiensammlungen* (collections of prodigies) and the lives of their authors.¹¹

Among the three compilers of wonder books named above, only Caspar Goltwurm was a pastor. Nonetheless, when we check the publication data of other genres of *Wunderzeichen* literature, the first thing we notice is that the majority of the authors of these materials are the clergy. Lutheran preachers showed great interest in strange celestial phenomena and often incorporated news of *Wunderzeichen* in their sermons and other writings. Based on Christ's prophecy of the world's end in Luke 21 and Matthew 24, these celestial phenomena were regarded as warning signs of the imminent coming of the Last Judgement, and they offered support for the clergy's eschatological world view. In addition, since it was generally believed that *Wunderzeichen* signified God's wrath towards unrepentant sinners, news of strange phenomena was used as a convenient tool to terrify people and to press them to turn to God. As we shall see in [Chapter 2](#), most of the prominent Lutheran theologians in the latter half of the sixteenth century mentioned *Wunderzeichen* in their writings, and a number of them showed their extensive knowledge about contemporary news of strange phenomena.

However, compared with the wonder books of Fincel and others, the clergy's discourses on *Wunderzeichen* have not received much scholarly attention, and until very recent years there had been only a few systematic studies that focus on the clergy's involvement in the production of *Wunderzeichen* literature.¹² Among these studies, Philip M. Soergel's *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonder Book in Reformation Germany* (2012) is by far the most outstanding contribution to this field in recent years. Focusing on the history of the Lutheran interest in prodigies, it analyses the theological world view underlying sixteenth-century wonder books, including those compiled by the clergy (we will return to his monograph later).¹³ Another inspiring example is C. Scott Dixon's article on sixteenth-century Lutheran astrological literature. Dixon points out that a considerable number of respected ministers published or commented on astrological predictions. He then analyses the influences of Lutheran eschatology and the clergy's frustrations with the slow progress of the Reformation in these astrological writings. This analysis reveals that the 'root of the Lutheran almanacs' in the late sixteenth century was the clergy's 'sense of frustration and failure, the conviction that the preaching of the gospel was not enough to indoctrinate the teachings of the church or the fear of God'.¹⁴ These pastors turned to 'preaching of the stars' as a different medium of sermons and tried to admonish people by almanacs. Dixon's keen observations can directly be

applied to the Lutheran clergy's *Wunderzeichen* literature in general, but such a study has not been written yet.

This relative neglect of the clergy's involvement in *Wunderzeichen* is to some degree understandable. Though a number of theologians published tracts, books and sermons focusing on *Wunderzeichen*, in many cases the clergy's references to *Wunderzeichen* are scattered in various religious publications such as postils, regular sermons, *Busspredigten* (sermons calling for repentance), sermons on the second Sunday of Advent, and devotional books on the Last Judgement and other topics. To comb through these works and to pick up references to celestial wonders one by one is time-consuming. In addition, in order to comprehend why the clergy were interested in these strange phenomena and what they intended to teach through *Wunderzeichen*, one must first understand the complex world of Lutheran eschatology because the apocalyptic world view was the backbone of *Wunderzeichen* discourses in the sixteenth century. Moreover, one should also examine the theological positions of the authors and see how they viewed the world surrounding the Church in their days. Considering the stormy condition of the Lutheran Church in the latter half of the sixteenth century, filled with complicated theological controversies, to grasp an author's theological position is not an easy task. Thus it is understandable that the relations between the clergy and *Wunderzeichen* literature have not yet been fully explored.

However, considering the fact that the clergy were the intellectual leaders of sixteenth-century communities and their strong influence on people's understanding of prodigies, we need to pay more attention to this topic. Moreover, a systematic study of the clergy's *Wunderzeichen* writings will also make a significant contribution to a recent trend in the history of science, which focuses on the vivid interactions between theology and science in early modern Europe, as early modern astronomy had strong connections with *Wunderzeichen*. In her work *Kepler's Tübingen* (1998), Charlotte Methuen states:

It is only in understanding how science, theology, and other expressions of culture interact with one another to confirm, but also to change, that culture and each other, that it is possible to understand how modern western intellectual and scientific standards came into being.¹⁵

In her book, she examines the theological views on nature among the theologians and the scientists of Tübingen University in the latter half of the sixteenth century and their impact on the young Johannes Kepler. Methuen emphasizes the significance of the educational influences of Philipp Melancthon, who regarded astronomy as the most important of the mathematical science because he believed that the perfect order of the movements of the heavenly bodies signified God's will and plan.¹⁶ She carefully examines the theological views on nature of Jacob Heerbrand, Kepler's teacher of theology at Tübingen, which showed the marked

influence of Melanchthon. *Wunderzeichen* are not forgotten here. Shortly after the great comet appeared in 1577, Heerbrand delivered a sermon warning people that this comet was a sign of God's wrath and punishment, and Methuen devotes four pages to summarizing the contents of this sermon.¹⁷ As she points out, despite his sceptical attitude towards astrology, Kepler's astronomy teacher Michael Maestlin (who was also a cleric, because he had once served as a pastor) did not hesitate to declare the comet as God's call for repentance.¹⁸ All of these theological/scientific discourses crystallized Kepler's self-identification as a 'priest of the book of nature' who 'interprets the message of the heavens to the glory of God'.¹⁹ For Kepler, the devotional aspect of astronomy was not mere rhetoric but the very core of his thought. Methuen's book not only provides background information of *Wunderzeichen* literature but also shows the possibility of how studying the interactions between theology, celestial wonders and astronomy can lead to a new dimension in the history of science. For this purpose, more study about theologians' writings on celestial phenomena is desired.

Lutheran Apocalypticism

Since Lutheran eschatology is the key to understanding the relation between the clergy and *Wunderzeichen* discourses, here we should examine the best study of Lutheran apocalypticism available in English: Robin Bruce Barnes's *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (1988), which offers a bird's-eye view of the development and decline of apocalyptic thinking of German Lutherans. According to Barnes, apocalypticism was not only a part but the very core of Lutheranism until the Thirty Years' War. From Martin Luther in the 1520s to Jakob Böhme in the 1620s, Lutherans were almost 'obsessed' with the idea that the end of the world was imminent.²⁰ Apocalypticism had existed since the time of the early Church, but Luther added a new dimension to the traditional eschatology. Since the Gospel was restored and Antichrist was revealed in the papacy, for Luther and his followers, it was clear that the Day of the Last Judgement could not be far away; the final cosmic struggle between the Church of Christ and the Church of the devil/Antichrist had started. As the years passed, Luther became deeply disappointed by the slow progress of the Reformation and did not hide his fear that the German people, blessed with the preaching of the Word of God for many years, were now missing their last chance to turn to Christ. This gloomy world view was inherited and developed by subsequent generations of reformers. The conditions surrounding their Church were hardly encouraging during the years following Luther's death. The Schmalkaldic War (1546–7), the Interim Crisis (1548–52), the theological controversies which split the Church, the advance of the Counter-Reformation, the spread of Calvinism and the shadow of religious wars – these threats

strengthened the siege mentality of Lutheran theologians and intensified their apocalyptic concerns. Quoting hundreds of primary sources, Barnes shows how strongly Lutheran theologians during the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries were obsessed with the deep fear that the Last Judgement would come while most people in the world were still misled by the devil.

This is the background of Lutheran clerical writings on *Wunderzeichen*. Based on various sixteenth-century theological and astrological discourses, Barnes spends many pages describing Lutheran enthusiasm for *Wunderzeichen* and astrology and its connection with the church leaders' eschatology. 'Indeed', he states, 'by 1560 attention to the unusual in nature had become nothing less than an obsession.'²¹ Barnes's arguments show that a number of prominent theologians, including Philip Melancthon, Andreas Musculus and Simon Pauli, showed profound interest in *Wunderzeichen*, and the eschatological interpretation of celestial phenomena had a strong influence on the scientific discourses of Tycho Brahe and other astronomers.²² It is Barnes's achievement to highlight the dynamic interactions between Lutheran theology, apocalyptic world views and the conditions of sixteenth-century society, a topic that had largely been neglected by historians. His study shows that people's interest in *Wunderzeichen* was by no means 'medieval superstition' or the result of ignorance; it belonged to the mainstream of the orthodox theology of Lutheranism, and many leaders of the Church actively promoted it. Barnes also successfully shows the immensely rich diversity of Lutheran eschatological discourses. Though they shared the same conviction that the world was coming to an end, Lutherans expressed their belief in a variety of ways. Some tried to decode Scripture passages to predict the timeline of the End of Days, while others turned to Kabbalah and other 'ancient' knowledge to comprehend the mysteries in Revelation. Many eagerly observed the movements of the heavenly bodies and looked for apocalyptic messages in the 'preaching of the stars'.

However, and despite these thought-provoking contents, there is one topic which is not covered to a great extent in Barnes's book. Between 1547 and 1580 the Lutheran Church was largely divided between 'Philippists' and 'Gnesio-Lutherans', and neither group hid their suspicions of the other. Was there any relation between these theological controversies and apocalyptic *Wunderzeichen* discourses? Barnes briefly explains the theological differences between the two groups, but he later assesses that 'Gnesio-Lutherans, Philippists, and other factions did not differ in their central eschatological teachings' and 'here the theological issues can be safely ignored' because '[w]hat is important is that this sort of disagreement helped to fuel the apocalyptic sensibility that was already strong within Lutheranism ... The resulting confusion only heightened the common expectation of imminent Judgment.'²³ Barnes rightly recognizes that these theologians in conflict shared the conviction that Judgement Day was at hand and that they saw the controversies plaguing their Church in an eschatologi-

cal light. However, by generalizing these authors' voices, one can overlook the rich diversity of the apocalyptic conviction expressed in the *Wunderzeichen* discourses and the interesting dramas hidden behind individual works. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, several Lutheran theologians used *Wunderzeichen* as polemical weapons against theological opponents. The clergy, like Christoph Irenaeus, employed stories of celestial wonder to convince readers that strange phenomena appeared as warnings against the false teachers of the End Times. In the case of Irenaeus, the false teachers were Calvinists, Synergists and later the formulators of the Formula of Concord. In such cases the theological issues were at the very centre of these discourses and inseparable from the authors' world view. Borrowing Ronald K. Rittger's words, it is possible to state that '[a]s was true of nearly every aspect of culture and human experience in early modern Germany', celestial phenomena 'became confessionalized'.²⁴ Considering these points, interactions between theological controversies, apocalypticism and *Wunderzeichen* discourses deserve more scholarly attention.

Of course, stories of wonder are not the main focus of Barnes's study, and the omission of a few polemical works does not diminish the immense value of his work. Barnes's aim is to give a general overview of the world of Lutheran eschatology and explain the characteristics of End Time discourses, and with the use of 500 primary sources, he successfully accomplishes his goal. However, if we want to comprehend the roles *Wunderzeichen* fulfilled in sixteenth-century society and their relations with Lutheran religious culture, we must examine the complex interconnections between confessional conflicts and celestial wonders.

Prodigies, Confessional Conflicts and the Perception of Sins

The relationship between religious turmoil and the world of wonder is discussed in several recent works on early modern prodigies. Early modern monstrous births have received more scholarly attention than celestial wonders, and some of these studies give useful insight to *Wunderzeichen* research. Jennifer Spinks's *Monstrous Births and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (2009) focuses on the history of visual representations of misbirths throughout the sixteenth century (including the pre-Reformation period) and explores the diversity of people's perceptions of deformity and the meaning attached to individual incidents. Spinks points out that before the Protestant Reformation, monstrous births were not necessarily depicted in a negative light and were sometimes interpreted as positive omens. However, Luther's and Melancthon's use of the stories of the Monk-Calf in Saxony and the infamous Papal Ass brought 'a decisive shift in attitude, in which interpretation and representation became not only more polemical – and particularly anti-papal – but took on a notably apocalyptic aspect'.²⁵ This fearful image of misbirths as an apocalyp-

tic symbol was popularized through the illustrated wonder books by Fincel and Lycosthenes and the broadsheets juxtaposing monstrous births with other wonders and disasters. Spinks points out that Protestants were not the only group who used this topic for confessional propaganda. In his satiric print, Johann Nas, the Franciscan polemist of Ingolstadt, incorporated various images of deformed children born in Germany to mock the false nature of Luther's Church. The last primary source analysed in Spinks's study is the tract relating news of a three-headed baby in Brandenburg in the 1590s who verbally warned of imminent divine punishment. Though the text was not produced for specific propaganda purposes, we cannot grasp the full meanings of the news unless we understand '[t]he interaction of Lutheran, Calvinist and Catholic confessions in a period of intense uncertainty, marked by new anxieties about the Turkish threat', as the background of the report.²⁶ Thus Spinks's book reveals that negative representations of misbirths were established and developed in reaction to the confessional conflicts brought about by the Reformation.

Julie Crawford's *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (2005) also analyses the various social and religious functions fulfilled by the printed reports of misbirths in early modern England. Crawford's careful examinations of the social backgrounds of each report of monstrous births reveal how the stories of deformed babies were used to support the Protestant activists' campaigns against luxurious fashions, sexual immorality and other vices, mainly those committed by unruly women. Some messages, such as the Puritan minister William Leigh's sermon on the birth of the double-faced child in 1613, could contain political implications. In his sermon, quoting the news of the misbirth, Leigh condemns the Protestants' 'equivocation' and accuses that while they believed the Scripture's teaching, people 'do not live the life of the Gospel'. This sounds like a common moral admonition, but as Crawford points out, it could be a criticism against James I, whose equivocal dealings with Catholics won notoriety among the Puritans.²⁷ However, the cases more directly related with ongoing confessional conflicts are the two births of headless babies which occurred during the 1640s. One is the case of a woman who delivered a headless baby after declaring that she wanted her child to 'be born without a head, then to be signed with the signe of the Cross'. The other is about a recusant woman who stated that 'I would rather bear a child without a head then a roundhead' and ended up with the same result.²⁸ Understandably, the former report was used as propaganda against sectarianism while the latter was circulated to buttress Parliament's cause. Thus the bodies of deformed babies were interpreted from the perspectives of confessional politics and actively exploited to promote political agendas.

Crawford's focus is on the patriarchal attempts to control women's behaviours observed in these reports of wonder, and she states in one chapter: '[i]n fact, I suspect that some original determinations of deformed and stillborn

births as “monsters” were based on perceptions of their mother’s sins rather than on the actual forms of the births themselves.²⁹ Her sharp insight is also inspiring for us when we consider the meanings of *Wunderzeichen*. In the case of monstrous births, perceptions of their mothers’ sins made people see monstrosity in the deformed shapes of the poor babies; in the case of celestial wonders, in a sense, the clergy’s perceptions of human sins prevailing in society made celestial phenomena wondrous signs of God’s wrath. For Irenaeus, it was the sin of false prophets, the erroneous teachings of his theological opponents, which brought various strange phenomena in the sky. Thus discourses on prodigies are inseparable from the perception of sin in early modern Europe.

Here let us return to Soergel’s *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination*, which focuses on the theological background underlying the Lutheran wonder books that flourished between the 1550s and the 1600s. As his propagandist use of deformed animals indicates, Luther was fascinated with natural signs. However, he did not indulge in speculation about the pessimistic meanings of wondrous signs apart from God’s Word; rather, he stressed the benevolence of God working in nature which preserves this world, despite the sinfulness of humankind. The followers of Luther were less balanced than their teacher. The wonder books, which emerged from the deep uncertainty during the years after the Schmalkaldic War, were essentially preaching the Law, which emphasized human depravity and God’s wrath and punishment on human beings’ transgressions of divine commandments:

Each event, these authors [of wonder books] warned, was explicit punishment for a particular vice. In this way, the evangelical wonder book attempted to drive home a vital distinction long central to Reformation teaching: the relative differences between Law and Gospel.³⁰

Soergel believes that what was underlying such a tendency was ‘a deep uneasiness at the heart of a maturing Reformation, an uneasiness prompted by the growing realization that the teachings of faith alone were insufficient to ensure social discipline.’³¹

Indeed, stories of wonder as warning of divine wrath were self-disciplinary tools which offer ‘a remedy for the threat of antinomianism’. Wonder books ‘reinforced the vital role, identified by Melancthon and other early evangelicals, of the Law as a set of proscriptions that not only convicted the unrighteous but also bound the justified’. Unlike the early modern popular stories of Catholic miracles which commemorated God’s mercy, Protestant wonder tales were ‘almost universally negative in tone’ and cannot hide ‘the unrelieved pessimism that ran through the new genre.’³² This gloomy tendency culminated with the wonder books of Irenaeus, whose theology on original sin centred on the total depravity and corruption of human nature which lost the image of God through

the Fall. Soergel believes that this trend gradually changed around 1600, as the territorial Church assumed the corrective functions that Lutheran pastors had tried to exercise through the relentless preaching of the Law. The clergy became more eager to provide spiritual consolation for those who were in challenging situations (such as natural disasters), and people became more open to empirical observation of natural phenomena, no longer bound by the traditional reading of wonders. Thus Soergel clarifies that what constitutes the theological foundation of *Wunderzeichen* discourses was preaching of the Law, God's condemnation of human beings' wrongdoings, which was supposed to lead people to turn to God's mercy. This overemphasis of the Law imposes serious limitations to the message of wonder, as we shall see later.

The Structure of this Study

There are several further interesting studies that discuss the relation between prodigies and religious turmoil, such as Alexandra Walsham's *Providence in Early Modern England* (1999), but the above texts have shown the direction our study should take.³³ The points which should be focused on are confessional conflicts, apocalypticism and the theological perception of sin of humankind as the formative forces of *Wunderzeichen* discourses. If *Wunderzeichen* discourses were products of confessional struggles, what kind of functions did these texts fulfil in the process of the confessionalization of sixteenth-century Germany, including theological controversies? This is the topic to be pursued in this study. Since the interaction between confessional struggles and *Wunderzeichen* literature is the main point to explore, the primary sources of my study are the Lutheran clergy's publications on celestial wonders, such as sermons, postils, tracts and wonder books. One point to note is that when we analyse *Wunderzeichen* works by the clergy, we have to examine the context of each text carefully. Especially important is comprehend which theological positions the authors were taking and to consider for what purpose they were using *Wunderzeichen* in their arguments – were they quoting the stories of wonder simply to edify people and urge them to repent? Or was polemical intention hidden behinds their words? At a glance, most of the *Wunderzeichen* works seem to repeat the same message endlessly: 'the Last Judgement is at hand' and 'repent or disaster!' However, if we carefully dissect the contexts of individual works, we can find that these callings are not mere stock phrases; they also hide the various concerns and agendas of the Lutheran clergy.

Chapter 1 explores the world of *Wunderzeichen* in general, in order to grasp what kinds of media people used to obtain information about celestial wonders, what celestial phenomena were regarded as *Wunderzeichen*, and how contemporary people interpreted their meanings. This chapter resembles a more traditional *Wunderzeichen* study. Besides examining several writings by Lutheran ministers,