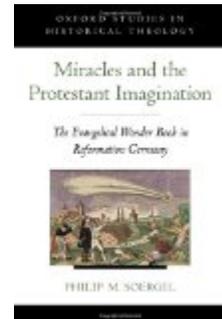




Philip M. Soergel. *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonder Book in Reformation Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Illustrations. 256 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-984466-1.

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## Deformity, Disaster, and the Sixteenth-Century Lutheran Wonder Book

Historians of early modern Europe have long discussed the various uses to which miracles were put in Catholic regions, such as Iberia, Italy, and southern Germany. Many historians have also considered the vast early modern output on natural wonders and signs. Philip M. Soergel's historiographical contribution in *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination* marries these two concerns while casting a careful eye at Lutheran thinking on these issues during the sixteenth century. Soergel explores the meanings of "miracles" for Lutherans, not Catholics, in the German lands in the period following the death of Martin Luther, and carefully analyzes the coupling of theological debate and the genre of natural "wonders" between 1550 and 1600.

Soergel makes a very basic distinction between the terms "wonder" and "miracle" at the end of chapter 1: "I refer to the texts compiled by sixteenth-century evangelicals as 'wonder books' to distinguish them from the 'miracle books' of late-medieval and early modern Catholics, which were collections of favors granted through the intercession of saints and were usually kept at a specific shrine" (pp. 31-32). Further, Soergel notes that the term "miracle" (Wunderzeichen) can be used to discuss the "larger phenomena of speculation about all these" wondrous happenings (p. 32). This distinction is helpful in thinking about the different approaches to extraordinary events that Catholics and Lutherans took in the era of the Reformation.

Wunderzeichenbücher (literally, "wonder-signs books") were massive collections of accounts of monstrous births, physical deformities, and natural disasters that sold very well in Lutheran lands during the second half of the sixteenth century. Famous individual wonders or "freaks" included Hans de Moer, who had a hemangioma growth on his neck that stretched to his waist; and the East Frisian Magdalena Emohne, who was missing both arms and a leg. All but a few of these wonder books (the exceptions all written by Job Finsel) were penned by university-trained humanists and aimed at a clerical audience. Still, they were popular among elites and nonelites alike in cities and towns because they were fascinating and inexpensive.

Half of Soergel's book consists of an analysis of wonder books by three Lutheran writers who wrote widely on wonders: Finsel, Caspar Goltwurm, and Christoph Irenaeus. Works by these three men tended to be repetitive and insistent on the idea that the wonders they recounted pointed to mankind's depravity and the imminent end of the world. For these men and scores of other writers on wonders, one could read God's signs in the book of nature and these signs could encourage people to perfect themselves before the Last Judgment. Indeed, the advent of the wonder book after 1550 suggests that Lutheran thinkers saw mankind as growing more and more evil and corrupt. Dramatic political, confessional, and climatic changes reinforced such thinking.

Soergel evokes the ways in which wonder writing worked out and expressed tensions between Gnesio-Lutherans and Philippists before and after the Formula of Concord (1577). Conversely, Luther, who died before wonder books began being published in the 1550s, was much more incredulous about the meanings of wonders and always insisted that the word should take precedent over wonders in demonstrating God's works. In short, third-generation reformers developed new theological genres to confront religious tensions and disagreements that went beyond the ideas and writings of Luther.

The outlook of these writers soon grew moribund, however. After 1600, writers came to develop a "new sensibility" toward writing on deformity and natural disaster, jettisoning discussion of "wonders" and "monstrosity" and embracing a clearer focus on empirical observation and reporting (p. 169). In addition, "the rising importance of the territorial church in the German-speaking world [in the early seventeenth century], with its enhanced mechanisms of discipline and control, now assumed many of the corrective and penal functions that Lutheran divines had once assigned primarily to the preaching of the Law" (p. 168). Still, "in the history of religion and culture, there are no sudden changes, no revolutions that alter everything in their wake," no clear and abrupt leap from wonder writing to Enlightenment preoccupations with classifying and recording the natural world (p. 182).

Also, the intense pessimism that Finsel, Goltwurm,

and Irenaeus articulated about the world and human nature "was not the universal experience of sixteenth-century men and women, but instead a theologically conditioned response designed to protect a theologian's understanding" of Luther's formulation of the doctrine of total depravity (p. 183). More than likely, most people ignored the theological message of the wonder book and instead read and heard them for their entertainment value, whether it be about the Ensisheim meteorite, a girl with two heads, a man with a huge growth on his neck, a girl missing her arms, or a beached whale. After all, it is now a well-worn historical dictum that the more something is prohibited in writing and the law, the more it is happening in reality. Of course, people were no more evil or corrupt in the 1550s than they were in any other period, but writers were much more attuned to it at that time, and wrote about it accordingly.

Soergel's monograph is sensitively and perceptively written and displays the author's great ability to closely read historical sources. The text is at times repetitive because the sources Soergel examines were highly repetitive. Beyond that, the book has only a couple of flaws: Soergel's discussion of the political context of these wonder books, so nuanced and pronounced in chapter 1, largely disappears in chapters 2 through 6; and the number of illustrations is small and not always of a high level of clarity. These are quibbles that barely detract from the overall impact of the work, one in which different concerns of historians of the sixteenth century are brought together with verve and aplomb.

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