"ON THE OCCASION": CHARLES WESLEY’S HYMNS ON THE LONDON EARTHQUAKES OF 1750

Karen B. Westerfield Tucker

The alarm here continues and increases, through the daily accounts we receive of more earthquakes. I am printing more hymns and a sermon on the occasion.

So wrote Charles Wesley to “My beloved Sally” on March 29, 1750.¹ In this letter to his wife, Charles apparently refers to a new hymn pamphlet, *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake, March 8, 1750. Part II*, which had been preceded by one under the same title. Wesley’s intention in writing the hymns and the sermon “on the occasion” was to offer a theological and pastoral reflection on a current crisis. In so doing, Wesley participated in the long-standing, even pre-Reformation, English practice of supplementing the authorized liturgical resources in times of national anxiety, emergency, or disaster with new forms of prayer, calls on a national scale for penitence, fasting, charitable actions, and the preaching of sermons. His use of verse as social and theological commentary likewise was not unique, but reflected a custom well known and well used in his day. Given his particular social location, it was necessary for Wesley also to take on the questions posed by the Enlightenment rationalists of his day regarding the nature of God and the nature of humanity, and the relationship between scientific inquiry and natural theology, or more precisely, the relationship between primary and secondary causes. What, then, was the particular “alarm” that demanded a response?

I

The first was felt after noon on February 8, 1750 in London and Westminster, and in outlying areas on both sides of the Thames. It was also sensible as far afield as Gravesend and Hertford. Moving from the southeast to the northwest, the shock jolted houses; toppled chimneys, brought down a slaughterhouse in Southwark, and rocked or overturned, boats at their moorings. Chairs rattled and pewter clattered to the floor. A rumbling noise accompanied the heaving earth. Alarmed, most residents bolted from their homes or places of work. Even the counselors in the court of King’s bench

and chancery in Westminster Hall deserted the building for fear of collapse, provoking versified ridicule in the press:

You say, old Rufus' fabric trembl'd,
When Earth her entrails shook;
And all the able hands assembl'd,
The term-time work forsook.
'Twas wrong -- they shou'd have made a stand, 
And not have left their shops:
If law's the basis of the land, 
Sure lawyers are the props. 3

A month later, on March 8, a tremor affected roughly the same area, this one seemingly more violent than the first. The shaking, which began approximately a half-hour after five in the morning, was reported by many to have been preceded several hours earlier by milder shocks, and immediately before by severe lightning, roars like exploding cannon, and the rushing of wind. Chimneys, houses, and kitchenware were again damaged. Steeple bells sounded after being struck by their swaying hammers, and stones fell from the new spire at Westminster Abbey. In Charterhouse Square, a maidservant who was tossed out of bed broke her arm. Dogs howled, fish jumped, sheep scattered, roosting crows took flight, and trees visibly shook. Fortunately, no deaths resulted. 4 Quipped Horace Walpole, author and Member of Parliament, "as far as earthquakes go towards lowering the price of wonderful commodities, to be sure we are overstocked." 5


3 The Scots Magazine 12 (February 1750) 87. "Rufus" refers to William Rufus, the eldest son of William the Conqueror and the builder of Westminster Hall.


5 Letter to Horace Mann, March 11, 1750, The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence, vol. 20: Horace Walpole's Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann IV, ed. W. S. Lewis, Warren Hunting Smith, and George L. Lam (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960) 130. Walpole recounted to Mann, the English envoy in Florence, that he felt the earth's "shivering fit" between one and two on the morning of 8 March; regarding the stronger tremor, he noted: "on a sudden I felt my bolster lift up my head; I thought somebody was getting from under my bed, but soon found it was a strong earthquake, that lasted near half a minute, with a violent vibration and great roaring" (ibid.).
The first earthquake provoked reactions of curiosity as well as concern. Attendance of visitors at the February meeting of the Royal Society of London increased dramatically for a discussion about earthquakes. The February issue of several popular magazines included, in brief, histories of earthquakes in England and abroad as well as theories about their cause. But alongside such "philosophical" reports and discussions appeared also admonitions to heed what appeared to be God's displeasure, as was intended by this anonymous poem in the Gentleman's Magazine:

Britain! attend the warning voice,
And dare be deaf no more!
The God that makes still sounds his choice,
Can bid his thunders roar.

The sanguin field, the vacant stall,
Have cry'd aloud REPENT;
The Locusts next repeat the call,
On the same errand sent.

An Earthquake now speaks louder yet,
And shakes a guilty shore:
Ye fools, who slumber near the pit,
Wake now, or wake no more.

If reason and religion nod,
And wretches truth despise,
The brutal world will arm for God,
And in his quarrel rise.

E'en Earth itself shall leave its base,
With indignation mov'd,
Ere man, a favour'd, thankless race
Be guilty, unreprov'd.

How deep the wound, and great the fall,
When God shall give the blow,
If, deaf to ev'ry friendly call,
We no repentance show.

Dear Britons! then, for your own sakes,
Avert the fatal stroke,
Lest God's tremendous vengeance wakes,
Nor love the doom revoke.

One parson, after hearing debates whether the noise and shaking were the result of an earthquake or an explosion, remarked, "They are such an impi­ous set of people, that I believe if the last trumpet was to sound, they would

'Gentleman's Magazine 20 (February 1750) 87.
bet puppet-show against judgment. Even King George II saw God at work. He refused to attend a masquerade, thinking that no one would do so after such an act of judgment, though he was wrong.

Following the second earthquake, scientific and theological commentaries proliferated. Speculation that the earthquakes resulted from the proximity of Jupiter to the earth or their actual contact, an event supposedly predicted by Isaac Newton, was soundly denounced. Some persons, taking the deistic position of a remote clockmaker God and “rationally” explaining earthquakes as purely natural phenomena, reinforced or developed older claims that the source of earthquakes was subterranean air, water, or fire.

Two new theories were set forward, with their principal proponents clergy scientists (both Fellows of the Royal Society) who, in their understanding of natural theology, saw no reason to divorce the natural and supernatural. One theory by Stephen Hales, curate at Teddington, may have been influenced by an idea postulated in a 1693 letter by first Astronomer Royal John Flamsteed that up to that time had gotten little attention. In light of events then current, Flamsteed’s contribution was republished. Based in part on “evidence” supplied by the London tremors, Hales posited that when sulphurous fumes are emitted from the pores of the earth, especially in hot and dry weather, and do not disperse because of lack of air movement, the resulting sulphurous clouds may explode like lightning near the earth’s surface. An earthquake thus is the result of an “airquake.” Yet along with his airquake theory, Hales acknowledged that, “the Hand of God is not to be overlooked in these things, under whose Government all natural Agents act; especially such rare and unusual Events as Earthquakes.” For, “God sometimes changes the Order of Nature, with Design to chastise Man for his Disobedience and Follies; natural Evils being graciously designed by him as moral Goods: All Events are under his Direction, and fulfil his Will.”

Similarly, William Stukeley at St. George’s Church, Queen Square, Bloomsbury, took the position that there was no need to, “lose Sight of the theological Purpose of these amazing Alarms, whilst we endeavour to find out the Philosophy of them.” “It certainly becomes a Christian Philosopher whilst he is investigating material Causes,” said Stukeley, “to look up to the moral Use of them; for, in reality, every thing in the whole World was ultimately made for that Purpose. And of all the great and public Calamities which affect us Mortals, Earthquakes claim the first Title to the Name of Warnings and Judgments.”

---

8 Letter to Horace Mann, March 11, 1750, Horace Walpole's Correspondence, 20:131.
10 “To the Author, &c.,” London Magazine 19 (March 1750) 103.
13 Hales, 669-70.
rial" cause of earthquakes, claimed Stukeley, was electricity, specifically the shock produced between a non-electrified cloud and the highly electrified earth. In presenting this second theory, Stukeley drew upon the previous work of Benjamin Franklin, who had just a few months earlier discussed his studies of atmospheric electricity with the Royal Society.16

Specifically theological interpretations of the earthquakes took a variety of forms, though in general each saw the movement of earth as an additional warning to a sinful people and a call for "spiritual improvement" — additional, because England had already experienced "judgment" through an infestation of locusts and sickness in its cattle. Poems and essays continued to be printed in newspapers and monthlies. Following the precedent of his royal ancestors, the king found it fitting to issue a prayer for use in churches and chapels, especially since the second quake fell during Lent:

O most Glorious and Gracious God; whose Judgments against obstinate Offenders are most severe and terrible, but whose mercies are infinite to all them that with hearty Repentance and true Faith turn unto thee: We, the sinful People of this Land, do adore thy most righteous Judgment in all that is come upon us, and do humble ourselves under thy mighty Hand; acknowledging before thee with Shame and Confusion of Face, that we are no more worthy to be called thy Sons or thy Servants, whom neither thy Judgments have driven, nor thy Goodness led to Repentance. In mercy, O God, awaken us all to a true and deep Sense of our manifold and often repeated provocations. Pardon the great Offences of us thy Servants, and the crying Sins of the whole nation; remove the Evils we still lie under, and turn from us those we have just Cause to fear. It is of thy Goodness, O Lord, that we were not all consumed by the late dreadful Earthquakes, the Beginning of Sorrows, and Forerunners of our final Destruction, and that in the midst of Judgment thou didst remember Mercy. Let the strong Sense of our late marvellous Preservation work in us such a thankfulness of Heart, and such a Seriousness and Watchfulness of Spirit, that no Calamity may ever be a Surprize to us, nor Death itself come upon us unawares; that so we may at length arrive safely at that blessed Kingdom which cannot be shaken: For the sake of Jesus Christ our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen.17
Pulpits offered a ready venue for the explication of what were believed to be God's intentions and Anglican and Dissenter alike took the opportunity, with some of them committing their sermons to print. Samuel Hull, preaching from II Samuel 22:8 at Lorriners Hall on Sunday, March 11, pleaded that God might awaken the citizens of London and Westminster, "from the spiritual Sleep of carnal Security, and excite them to fly for Mercy to the Hope set before them in the Gospel." Thomas Secker, Bishop of Oxford and later Archbishop of Canterbury, took Psalm 2:11 as his text for the March 11 service in the parish church of St. James, Westminster. God sends earthquakes and other alarms in every age to awaken people from their lethargy and to remind them of the final judgment that will inevitably come. The two most recent shocks, said Secker, were particularly directed at London, the, "headquarters and example of wickedness to the whole island." The sins of Londoners worthy of punishment were many, yet Secker noted that earthquakes are also signs of hope and God's favor for those who turn from their wickedness, since one quake occurred at the death and another at the resurrection of the Lord, "the two great bulwarks of Christian comfort." In a sermon drawn from Isaiah 5:12 and delivered April 4 at Crosby Square, Dissenter Thomas Newman took similar lines, and also rebuked those who denied God's involvement in favor of scientific explanations, "Scripture directs us, and our reason at once falls in therewith, to give this as the only satisfactory answer, all these things hath God's hand made."

The Bishop of London also spoke out on the situation in the form of a pastoral letter to the clergy and people that, after initial publication on March 16, went through numerous printings, was published in full or excerpted by the press, and was quoted in part in sermons. Identifying the tremors as a "strong summons from God to repentance," Thomas Sherlock said he was compelled by his status as "servant and monitor in Christ Jesus" to warn his flock to, "flee from the wrath that is to come," particularly since, "they have loved darkness" though they have, "had the light." He commented at length upon specific vices and corruptions in religion and morals, including the publication of books that, "ridicule the great truths of religion, both natural and revealed," and bemoaned that the season of Lent had been turned into, "a time of mirth and jollity, of music, dancing, and riotous living." He urged

---


21 Horace Walpole, in a letter to Horace Mann dated April 2, 1750, observed that ten thousand copies of the Bishop's letter were sold in two days and that fifty thousand had been subscribed for (*Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 20:133).
the people to reform themselves and the clergy to preach repentance, “for the dissolute wickedness of the age is a more dreadful sign and prognostication of divine anger, than even the trembling of the earth under us.”22 In general, the Bishop’s letter was positively received, though some published letters questioned his certain knowledge of divine intention (“Who knoweth the Councils [sic] of the Almighty?”), especially God’s singling out the English over other wicked peoples and nations, and his omission of a charge to repentance and reform directed at the clergy.23

While the Bishop’s letter and the preaching of sermons may have had the desired effect of encouraging repentance, they also undoubtedly contributed to an escalating sense of panic. It had not been lost on most citizens that the second and more severe earthquake had hit exactly a month after the first. What awaited in April, either on the 5th (Thursday), exactly four weeks after the previous shock, or on the 8th (Sunday)? Tensions increased when “Mitchell,” a lifeguard man of Lord Delawar’s regiment, prophesied the destruction of Westminster and London for April 5 between midnight and one, thus earning himself the epithet “military prophet,”24 and a shoemaker turned field preacher claimed that an angel revealed the world’s destruction for Sunday morning.25 But these were only the latest prognostications encouraged by recent events. Added to these were the previous predictions made by such well known and controversial intellectuals as William Whiston, who tried to substantiate his “biblical” prophesy for the arrival of the millennium in lectures given to Londoners on March 6, 8, and 10.26 Even

22 Letter from the Lord Bishop of London, to the Clergy and People of London and Westminster; On occasion of the Late Earthquakes, (London: Printed for John Whiston, 1750) Because the Bishop of London had jurisdiction over the colonies in America, his letter was reprinted there, as is evident from a Boston publication “Re-Printed and sold by John Draper” dated 1750.
24 Commented Catherine Talbot in a letter, “[He] has prophesied a thousand shocking things, and to hear them hawked about this morning almost chilled me; there was something horrid in it; though the only real horror belonging to it, is the pain it must give to weak low-spirited people” (Letter of Miss Talbot to Mrs. Carter, 3 April 1750, A Series of Letters between Mrs. Elizabeth Carter and Miss Catherine Talbot, from the year 1741 to 1770; published from the original manuscripts in the possession of the Rev. Montague Pennington, 3d ed. (London: Printed for F. C. and J. Rivington, 1819) 1:276. The “prophet” retracted his prediction before 5 April, saying that Londoners’ acts of repentance had satisfied God for the moment. He was, in the end, committed to a madhouse. See The Military Prophet’s Apology; Or, Probable Reasons for Deferring the Earthquake. In a letter to Dr. M-dd--t-n (London: Nathan Foretell, 1750) 3-4.
25 The Scots Magazine 12 (March 1750) 153.
Dissenting minister and hymn writer Philip Doddridge had foretold doom the previous August in a sermon in which sinful London was likened to Sodom and Gomorrah that in the end had succumbed to the "reeling" earth.27

The response of many terrified persons, rich and poor, was to flee the city, which garnered a spate of literary reactions. In his sermon of March 11, Bishop Secker asked, "But do you hope to fly from God? Fly from your iniquities to God, if you would be safe."28 In the same vein, a list of queries appeared in papers and magazines addressed to those leaving town. Among them:

Whether they can hope, by a change of place, to flee from the face of that God who is every where present?
Whether they think the divine displeasure, expressed in those convulsions of nature, is against the spot of ground on which London stands, or against the wickedness of the persons who generally reside in this capital?
Whether their own particular vices ought not to be put in the account, when they are meditating on this motive, and considered as the chief cause of their particular danger?29

There was also criticism, serious and cynical, in published verse. From The Scots Magazine:

You tax the age with unbelief:
But where has your attention been?
The scene is chang'd. -- Dispel your grief;
Credulity's the reigning sin.

Britons attend! from Folly's bed
A dreamer starts, and tells his tale;
And by his brain-sick dreams are led
Both the great vulgar and the small.

See, Sherlock! a believing age
The word of prophecy reject;
But, when a dreamer mounts the stage,
Him they receive with all respect.30

And in the London Magazine:

A Word to the Wise, and especially to the Other wise, who are not yet run away from our Metropolis.
When dread convulsions shake this ball of earth,

---

27Philip Doddridge, The guilt and doom of Capernaum seriously recommended to the consideration of the inhabitants of London: in a sermon preached at Salters-Hall, August 20, 1749; published on occasion of the late alarm by the second shock of an earthquake, March 8, 1749-50: with a preface relating to that awful event, (London: Printed by J. Waugh, 1750).
29Gentleman’s Magazine 20 (March 1750) 125 [which lists the source as the London Evening Post] and London Magazine 19 (April 1750) 177 [which lists the source as the Westminster Journal for 31 March].
30The Scots Magazine 12 (March 1750) 154.
Adore the power who gave creation birth:
With deep contrition think on failings past;
And live, as tho' that sun might shine your last.
Yet let not wizard-tales your judgment blind.
Why shou’d feign’d, future earthquakes fright mankind?
Low, stupid panicks speak a pigmy race:
Let such no more our learned isle disgrace.
Dauntless, the good and wise in London stay:
Wicked or weak are all who sneak away.

A Word more, (to the Other-wise only.)
Rise from your lurking holes, each dastard fool;
Creep back to town, and go to wisdom’s school:
There learn, that heaven’s decrees are hid in night;
Not fram’d for knaves or dupes to bring to light:
Learn one just fear, the fear of doing ill;
Or acting to offend th’ almighty will;
That will, which instantly bid nature rise,
And governs her each work, all good, all wise.
    Eclipses, shadows, dancing lights dismay,
And thus our mental emptiness betray:
To try our faith, lo! bottle-conjurers rise;
And last a craz’d enthusiast blinds our eyes.
Shou’d justice weigh impartial in her scales,
As folly triumphs, or as sense prevails;
She’d think the palm, to those who fled not, due;
A birchen-rod to run-away, — like you.31

Such reproof did little to staunch the flow of men, women, and children moving by foot or carriage to the countryside. In the days immediately before April 5, as many as 730 coaches were counted passing Hyde Park Corner. Those unable to depart readied themselves. Numerous women sewed “earthquake gowns” to keep themselves warm when they sat outside on the night of April 4.32

III

On March 8, Charles Wesley had been leading worship at the Foundery when the earthquake struck and shook the structure, raising cries of fear. He noted in a letter to his brother John that Psalm 46 came to mind and that, “God filled my heart with faith, and my mouth with words, shaking their souls, as well as their bodies.”33 Over the next three days, Wesley recorded in his journal that services of worship were especially crowded and that he had taken as his text Psalm 46 (March 9) and Isaiah 24 (March 10). “My spirit and many others’ seem revived by the late judgment.”34

To address the issues that two successive earthquakes had thrust upon the people of London and Westminster, Charles Wesley, as others of his fellow

31London Magazine 19 (April 1750) 186.
32Letter to Horace Mann, April 2, 1750, Horace Walpole’s Correspondence, 20:137.
clergy had done, used the literary devices of sermon and verse. Psalm 46, mentioned twice in the first two days of the crisis, was for him a pivotal text that spoke of God simultaneously as desolator and refuge. It was the one taken for Charles’ written sermon on the subject of the earthquakes, and it appeared in the form of a metered paraphrase in Part I of *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake, March 8, 1750.* Though not always quoted in the five hymns of Part I or the thirteen hymns in *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake, March 8, 1750. Part II*, Psalm 46 nonetheless appears to provide a conceptual framework for both parts. This does not exclude Wesley’s customary use of a catena of scripture in producing a unified prose or poetic text. Because the hymns and the sermon share a literary and historical linkage and because the intended audience for both is saint and sinner alike, references to the sermon will be made when examining the content of the hymn texts.

A. The Cause and Purpose of Earthquakes

Charles Wesley, cognizant of contemporary philosophical and theological discussions concerning the causes of earthquakes, took the position that, “earthquakes are the works of the Lord”; “God is himself the author . . . whatever the natural cause may be.” Scientific explanations by “smooth prophets” ignored or denied God’s ongoing direction over all things, seen and unseen:

> From whence these dire portents around,  
> That strike us with unwonted fear!  
> Why do these earthquakes rock the ground,  
> And threaten our destruction near?  
> Ye prophets smooth, the cause explain,  
> And lull us to repose again.

> “Or water swelling for a vent,  
> “Or air impatient to get free,  
> “Or fire within earth’s entrails pent”;  
> Yet all are order’d, Lord, by Thee;  
> The elements obey Thy nod,  
> And nature vindicates her God.”

---


36 The version of the earthquake hymns cited here is the more readily accessible G. Osborn, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1870) 6:17-52; however, the 18th printings (1750, 1755, and 1756) have also been examined and silent corrections have been made when Osborn’s version departs from both the second and third editions. The text for the Psalm 46 paraphrase, not included in Osborn, was taken from the third edition (London: n.p, 1756) publication of Part I.


38 Stanzas 1-2, Hymn 5, Part I.
That nature is obedient to the divine will is also stressed by allusion to Psalm 148:8:

Vapours and damps confess'd their God,  
And did Thy word fulfil,  
And earth observed its Maker's nod,  
And trembled, and was still.  

Wesley had no doubt, following the dictates of Scripture and reason, that, "earthquakes are God’s ‘strange works’ of judgment, the proper effect and punishment of sin." The late events, to his mind, were warnings of God’s justifiable anger:

God of awful majesty,  
Thy glorious name we praise!  
Known are all thy works to Thee  
Of judgment, and of grace:  
In Thine only breast it lies  
To raise or sink, revive or slay:  
Wilt Thou yet again chastise,  
Or turn thy wrath away?  

Vengeance on Thy foes to take  
Hast Thou in anger sworn?  
Sworn again our earth to shake,  
And from its base o'erturn?  
Surely then to Abraham's seed  
Thou shalt reveal the wrath to come,  
Speak the punishment decreed,  
And warn us of our doom.  

The people's sin was profound and deserving of God's ire:

We Thy judgments have abhorr'd,  
We Thy covenant have broke,  
Daringly denied our Lord,  
Cast away His easy yoke,  
Would not cast our sins away,  
Would not know our gracious day.  

Like Bishop Sherlock, Charles signaled the rampant corruption in morals and religion that plagued England. Among the sins specifically identified were those he listed in a single hymn text, namely, vice, the scorn or denial of Christ, the Arian subordination of the Son that thereby fractured the co-equality of the triune God, self-righteousness, and self-deception.

39Stanza 8, Hymn 1, Part II.  
40The Sermons of Charles Wesley, 228.  
41Stanzas 1-2, Hymn 4, Part I.  
42Stanza 2, Hymn 6, Part II.
How vain, great God, and worse than vain,
How sinful our pretended pain
    In this our evil day!
Unless we to our Smite-turn,
The cause of all our evils mourn,
    And cast our sins away.

'Gainst vice we partially declaim,
With undiscerning censure blame
    Our nation's wickedness:
But O! the sin that loudest cries
For all the vengeance of the skies,
    We never once confess.

O might we from our hearts repent
Of scorning Him Thy pity sent
    To heal our sin and grief!
Assist us through Thy Spirit's power,
To own, and feelingly deplore,
    Our damming unbelief.

Convince the wretches who deny
Their Lord, that stoop'd for them to die,
    Who triumph in His pain,
Who trample on His precious blood,
And hate, and scoff the dying God,
    And crucify again.

Confound the misbelieving pride
Of those that impiously divide
    Thy dearest Son and Thee;
Who will not Him Thine Equal own,
But madly threaten to dethrone
    The Filial Deity.

And O! Almighty Son of God,
Into the blind self-righteous crowd
    Thy sharpest arrows dart;
The men who infidels condemn,
Nor ever knew themselves the same,
    Mere infidels in heart.

A formal self-deceiving race,
Who mock the counsel of Thy grace,
    The sense of sins forgiven,
The power of godliness explode,
The witness, and the peace of God,
    And faith that leads to heaven.43

Although it was individuals who were guilty, by the collective stain the
(Christian) nation was also implicated and judged:

43Stanzas 1-7, Hymn 5, Part II.
Your sins for vengeance call,  
Your sins the scourge demand,  
Your sins have judgment brought on all  
The sad polluted land:  
Cursed for your only sake,  
The earth reels to and fro,  
And lo! its deep foundations shake,  
And Tophet yawns below.  

Your sins for vengeance call,  
Your sins the scourge demand,  
Your sins have judgment brought on all  
The sad polluted land:  
Cursed for your only sake,  
The earth reels to and fro,  
And lo! its deep foundations shake,  
And Tophet yawns below.

[Isaiah 24:20]  
[Isaiah 30:33]  
[Micah 4:3]  
[Psalm 104:32]  
[Psalm 97:5]  
[Isaiah 29:6]

*****

Now, Lord, to shake our guilty land,  
Thou dost in indignation rise;  
We see, we see Thy lifted hand  
Made bare a nation to chastise,  
Whom neither plagues nor mercies move  
To fear Thy wrath, or court Thy love.

Therefore the earth beneath us reels,  
And staggers like our drunken men,  
The earth the mournful cause reveals,  
And groans our burden to sustain;  
Ordain'd our evils to deplore,  
And fall with us to rise no more.

[Isaiah 24:19-20]

In spite of God's dramatic warnings, Wesley acknowledged that sinners still would refuse to change their habits:

The crowd alarm'd with short surprise,  
And spared, alas! in vain,  
Started, and half unseal'd their eyes,  
And dropp'd to sleep again.

[Psalm 104:32]  
[Psalm 97:5]  
[Isaiah 29:6]

*****

The crowd, the poor unthinking crowd,  
Refuse Thy hand to see,  
They will not hear Thy loudest rod,  
They will not turn to Thee.  
As with judicial blindness struck,  
They all Thy signs despise,  

[Isaiah 24:20, Hymn 4, Part II.]

[Stanzas 4-5, Hymn 5, Part I. The first line of the fourth stanza is altered in the third edition to read "to shake a guilty land.

[Stanza 2, Hymn 1, Part II.]
Harden their hearts yet more, and mock
The anger of the skies.

But blinder still, the rich and great
In wickedness excel,
And revel on the brink of fate,
And sport, and dance to hell.
Regardless of Thy smile or frown,
Their pleasures they require,
And sink with gay indifference down
To everlasting fire. 47

[Psalm 95:8]

*****

How weak the thoughts and vain,
Of self-deluding men!
Men, who fix’d to earth alone,
Think their houses shall endure,
Fondly call their lands their own,
To their distant heirs secure.

How soon may God rebuke
Their folly with a look!
Caused by the Almighty’s frown,
When the sudden earthquake comes,
Then their hopes are tumbled down,
Then their houses are their tombs. 48

[Psalm 94:11]

[Matthew 25:41]

Psalm 139:8

Psalm 94:11

Psalm 49:11

Luke 12:18-21

Regarding the masses that were departing London and its environs, Charles reminded those determined to change their location and flee that they would inevitably face the consequence of their sin. Escape was not possible. To make his point, he posed the same rhetorical question as Bishop Secker that echoes the words of the Psalmist:

Ah! whither would ye fly
To screen your guilty heads?
Danger and death are always nigh,
Where’er a sinner treads:
Impenitent, ye strive
To’ escape with fruitless haste,
Whom earth must swallow up alive,
Or hell receive at last.

Tremble, ye Christless crowd,
Whom death and hell pursue,
Strangers, and enemies to God,
Alas! what will ye do?
In vain ye change your place,
If still unchanged your mind;
Or fly to distant climes, unless
Ye leave your sins behind.

[Psalm 139:7]

[Numbers 16:30]

Stanzas 3-4, Hymn 3, Part I.

Stanzas 1, 3, Hymn 9, Part II.
“On The Occasion”

Who can escape the wreck
In that vindictive day!
The mountains at His presence quake,
The mountains flee away;
The rocks he rends and tears,
And violently throws down,
And nature in convulsions bears
The terror of His frown.49

B. The Cure of Earthquakes

“Judgment,” according to Wesley, is also “mercy’s harbinger.”50 God gives signs of impending judgment so that the warning may be heeded and doom escaped by the “timely repentance” both of individuals and the nation. “What but national repentance can prevent national destruction?”51

Great God, who, ready to forgive,
In wrath rememberest mercy still,
By whose preserving love we live,
Though doom’d the second death to feel;
We magnify Thy patient grace,
And tremble, while we sing Thy praise.52

*****

God of glorious majesty,
Whose judgments are abroad,
Pierce, and turn our hearts to Thee,
With sacred horror aw’d;
All this drowsy land awake,
And by the thunder of Thy power
Shake, our inmost spirits shake,
And let us sleep no more.

E’re the threatened ruin come,
A general terror dart,
Send the keen conviction home
To every thoughtless heart;
Shake us out of Satan’s hands,
Burst open every prison door,
Rouse, and loose us from our bands,
And bid us sin no more.53

But, says Wesley, penitence alone is insufficient unless a person also believes the Gospel and accepts salvation in Jesus Christ. Indeed, such “true repentance” is only possible through Christ himself, whose Spirit supplies

49 Stanzas 1-2, 5, Hymn 4, Part II.
50 From stanza 6, Hymn 11, Part II.
51 The Sermons of Charles Wesley, 234-35.
52 Stanzas 1, Hymn 1, Part I.
53 Stanzas 1, 3, Hymn 2, Part I.
the conviction against sin and unbelief and whose perpetual intercession frees the guilty.\textsuperscript{54}

But O! the Saviour of mankind
Hath gain'd for us a longer space,
Jesus His Father's heart inclin'd
To spare a vile rebellious race,
To snatch from Corah's fearful doom,
And save us from the wrath to come.

Then let us to our Saviour turn,
Answer His mercy's whole design,
With godly fear rejoice, and mourn,
And praises with confessions join,
'Till all these lowering clouds remove,
And God appears the God of love.\textsuperscript{55}

Jesus, Lord, to whom we cry,
The true repentance give,
Give us at Thy feet to lie,
And tremble, and believe;
On the Rock of Ages place
Our souls, 'till all the wrath is o'er;
Ground, and 'stablish us in grace,
And bid us sin no more.\textsuperscript{56}

Let all the faithless nation cry,
Redeem us, Saviour, or we die,
A second death to feel:
Jesus, Thine only name and blood
Can save us from the wrath of God,
Can ransom us from hell.\textsuperscript{57}

Jesu, save us from our sins,
Save us from our plague of heart,
All of unbelief convince,
All unto thyself convert;
Let our sin-sick spirits find
Thee the Healer of mankind.

No delight Thy goodness hath
In the death of him who dies;
Grant us then the living faith,

\textsuperscript{54}The Sermons of Charles Wesley, 236.
\textsuperscript{55}Stanzas 3-4, Hymn 1, Part I.
\textsuperscript{56}Stanza 4, Hymn 2, Part I.
\textsuperscript{57}Stanza 9, Hymn 5, Part II.
Faith that on Thy blood relies, 
Faith that all thy grace receives, 
Faith that all Thy fulness gives.5

To those who are truly penitent and faithful, God is a refuge and strength from the perils of earthquake and from the mockery of those who defame the divine name or assault the church. Wesley's paraphrase of Psalm 46 takes up in twelve stanzas these themes (Luther used the same Psalm to address similar issues in "A Mighty Fortress"), though only stanzas 1, 3-8 are quoted here:

God, the omnipresent God, 
Our Strength and Refuge stands, 
Ready to support our Load, 
And bear us in his Hands: 
Readiest when we need Him most, 
When to Him distress'd we cry, 
All who on his Mercy trust 
Shall find Deliverance nigh.

Let Earth's inmost Center quake, 
And shatter'd Nature mourn, 
Let th' unwieldy Mountains shake, 
And fall by Storms uptorn, 
Fall with all their trembling Load 
Far into the Ocean hurl'd, 
Lo! we stand secure in God, 
Amidst a ruin'd World.

From the Throne of God there springs 
A pure and crystal Stream, 
Life, and Peace, and Joy it brings 
To his Jerusalem: 
Rivers of refreshing Grace 
Thro' the sacred City flow, 
Watering all the hallow'd Place 
Where God resides below.

God most merciful, most high, 
Doth in his Sion dwell, 
Kept by Him their towers defy 
The Strength of Earth and Hell. 
Built on her o'ershadowing Rock, 
Who shall her Foundations move, 
Who her great Defender shock, 
Th' Almighty God of Love?

All that on this Rock are stay'd, 
The World assaults in vain, 
Ever present with his Aid 
He shall his own sustain:

5Stanzas 5-6, Hymn 6, Part II.
Guardian of the chosen Race,
Jesus doth his Church defend,
Save them by his timely Grace,
And save them to the End.

Furiously the Heathen rag’d
Against his Church below,
Kingdoms all their Power engag’d
Jerusalem t’ o’erthrow;
Earth from her Foundation
Yawn’d to swallow up her Prey,
Jesus spoke, she own’d his Word,
And quak’d, and fled away.

For his People in Distress
The God of Jacob stands,
Keeps us, ’till our Troubles cease,
In his Almighty Hands:
He for us his Power hath shewn,
He doth still our Refuge prove;
Loves the Lord of Hosts his own,
And shall for ever Love.

Wesley’s paraphrase of Psalm 46 employs the metaphor of the rock, an image he particularly favored in the earthquake hymns and used, according to scriptural precedent, to mean either a strong foundation or a secure place in which one could safely hide. Wesley’s paraphrase of Psalm 46 employs the metaphor of the rock, an image he particularly favored in the earthquake hymns and used, according to scriptural precedent, to mean either a strong foundation or a secure place in which one could safely hide. A christological interpretation to the Old Testament usage of “clefts in the rock” is given in one stanza:

Enter into the Rock, and hide
Your trembling spirits in the dust;
Fly to the clefts, the riven Side,
And in a dying Saviour trust.

The metaphor of the rock was one in a set of three that Charles Wesley employed in his sermon to lure penitent sinners, “Enter into the rock – the ark – the city of refuge.” These two metaphors also have a place in the earthquake hymns. Each is found in a hymn that summarizes a biblical narrative wherein is recounted the story of a faithful person who perseveres with God’s help amidst a sinful world. A hymn that takes up the account of Noah and the Flood (Hymn 7, Part II) gives different interpretations to the metaphor of the ark. It is the vessel that saved Noah and thus, “the heir of righteousness Divine.” It is Jesus himself, “to the Ark of mercy fly, / And Jesu’s wounds their refuge make.” And it is the church, “within the sacred

59 See Hymns 2 and 3 of Part I, and Hymns 4 and 9 of Part II. See also Wesley’s use of the image in his journal entry for 10 March 1750 (The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A, 2:69).
60 Stanza 2, Hymn 2, Part II. A similar christological interpretation is found in Stanza 10, Hymn 4, Part II, which refers to believers “Hid in the clefts of dying Love.”
61 The Sermons of Charles Wesley, 237.
Ark to rest”; “Triumphant o’er the blazing flood, / The church, and family of God, / Our Ark and we shall rest in heaven”). The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, an example of God’s judgment also found in the sermon, and the preservation of Lot create the context for the image of the city of refuge (Hymn 3, Part II). Herein Wesley contrasts, in two adjacent stanzas, the Old Covenant with the New, “O let us to our Zoar fly, / And find a place of refuge nigh,” is followed by, “Till all who will, escape, and rest / Close shelter’d in their Saviour’s breast.”

To those who find shelter in the Savior’s gracious keeping, the fitting response, according to Wesley, is gratitude and faithfulness, worship and thanksgiving:

Rise every soul in Jesus’ name,
Who after Him aspires;
The wonders of His love proclaim,
And praise Him in the fires.

Wherefore our lives shall show His praise
Long as our lives are given,
Or snatch’d from earth obtain a place
Immovable in heaven.62

Accepting our deliverance, Lord,
Our long, or short, reprieve,
Thy wondrous goodness we record,
And to Thy glory live.

We never will the grace forget,
But thankfully improve,
And still in songs of praise repeat
Thy providential love.63

But these faithful servants must also keep alert to see what the Lord will do next, confidently secure:

Blessed are the servants, Lord,
Whom Thou shalt watching find,
Hanging on Thy faithful word,
And to Thy will resign’d;
Safe amidst the darts of death,
Secure they rest in all alarms,
Sure their Lord hath spread beneath
His everlasting arms.64

[Luke 12:37]  
[Titus 1:9]  
[Ephesians 6:16]  
[Deuteronomy 33:27]

62Stanzas 1, 4, Hymn 8, Part II.
63Stanzas 9-10, Hymn 1, Part II.
64Stanza 4, Hymn 4, Part I.
C. Earthquakes as an Instrument of God’s New Creation

In general, the content of Charles Wesley’s sermon and hymns, as thus far identified, has been comparable in its theological and spiritual emphases to the literature produced after the earthquakes by other English religious leaders. There are, of course, particular “Methodistical” nuances, and characteristic words and phrases in the hymns. But on the whole, Wesley’s theological arguments fall in line with Anglican and Dissenting writers focused on motivating the people to repentance in response to God’s warning. Or, perhaps it should be read in another way. Because of the calamity of the earthquake, a more evangelical approach was taken up by those not normally of that camp, and closer to what the Methodist movement had already been advocating. For indeed, Charles Wesley’s earthquake sermon and hymns, though they speak to the specifics of the current events, are a version of his standard rehearsal of the grand history of salvation and of the more personal via salutis.

The hymns go beyond the sermon in developing an additional understanding of the purpose of the earthquakes. They herald that the “ruined world” (so identified in the Psalm 46 paraphrase) is giving way to a “new-created earth” marked by the return of the one who is the “Desire of Nations”:

Wars, and plagues, and great distresses,
The tremendous day fore-run,
Earthquakes felt in divers places
Show the latter times begun;
Want, and national confusion,
Boding grief, and panic fear,
Mark the times of restitution,
Speak the great Restorer near.

Hark how all nature groans
In pangs of second birth!
Expect, ye ransom’d ones,
A new-created earth,
The ruin of the old is near:
Look up, and see your Lord appear!

His tokens we espy,
And now lift up our head,
And in the earthquake cry,
It is my Saviour’s tread!
He comes to save His servants here:
Look up, and see your Lord appear!

---

65 This image from Haggai 2:7 is found in stanza 3, Hymn 10, Part II and in stanza 1, Hymn 13, Part II.
66 Stanzas 3–4, Hymn 11, Part II.
67 Stanzas 3–4, Hymn 11, Part II.
"On The Occasion"

On that eschatological day will be *seen* the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem:

O might we quickly find  
The place for us design'd;  
*See* the long-expected day  
Of our full redemption here!  
Let the shadows flee away,  
Let the new-made world appear.

High on Thy great white throne,  
0 King of saints, come down;  
In the *New Jerusalem*  
Now triumphantly descend,  
Let the final trump proclaim  
Joys begun which ne'er shall end!\textsuperscript{68}

Surrounded by his saints, Christ will then reign for eternity:

Plant the heavenly kingdom here,  
Glorious in Thy saints appear,  
Speak the sacred number seal'd,  
Speak the mystery fulfill'd.

Take to Thee Thy royal power,  
Reign, when sin shall be no more,  
Reign, when time no more shall be,  
Reign to all eternity\textsuperscript{69}

Thus, because they forecast the fulfillment of the kingdom of God, earthquakes ultimately signal a "permanent peace."\textsuperscript{70}

Bring the kingdom of Thy Spirit,  
Joy, and righteousness, and peace;  
Purchased by Thy dying merit,  
Every child of man possess;  
Come to us, who languish for Thee,  
Us, who long Thy face to see,

Fill the latter house with glory,  
Then receive us up to Thee.\textsuperscript{71}

In approaching earthquakes as a sign of the new creation, Charles Wesley may have been influenced by the various millenarian interpretations of biblical prophecy that had been circulating in print. But more likely, his knowledge of Scripture, particularly his reading of the apocalyptic texts, inspired him to link the earthquakes with the second coming of Christ, thus giving the hymns a millennial tone. Although he could have drawn from the earth-

\textsuperscript{68} Stanzas 9-10, Hymn 9, Part II.  
\textsuperscript{69} Stanzas 5-6, Hymn 13, Part II.  
\textsuperscript{70} From stanza 3, Hymn 12, Part II.  
\textsuperscript{71} Stanzas 4, Hymn 10, Part II.
quakes recorded at the Crucifixion and the Resurrection to illustrate further
the theme of new creation, "the two great bulwarks of Christian comfort,"
which Bishop Secker had claimed, Wesley surprisingly did not do so.

D. The Anticipated April Earthquake

Armed with his "written sermon on the subject" and the published
hymns, Charles on April 4 preached the sermon and "gave out several suit­
able hymns" to an anxious crowd in the Methodist chapel. Charles's flock
were not alone. Throngs congregated in churches and chapels, Methodist
and otherwise, throughout the area as the day came to a close. Persons con­
cerned about toppling buildings spent the night in boats, in coaches and car­
rriages, and in parks and fields where they were met by preachers like George
Whitefield, who tended the guilt-laden and fearful in the open air of Hyde
Park at midnight. Those convinced of their spiritual security calmly went to
bed. It was, recorded Charles, who had slept soundly until 4 a.m., "a glori­
ous night for the disciples of Jesus." Yet even when April 5 had safely gone,
many citizens remained out of town or outside their homes until the 8th had
also passed.

Although thanksgiving and relief reigned, still there was satire about the
third earthquake that wasn't. An anonymous and fictional letter (usually
attributed to Paul Whitehead) was published, written as if the April 5 earth­
quake had indeed occurred, and describing the condition of certain persons
thereafter. The Bishop of London had been the first to perish. He could have
escaped, "but his zeal was so great in distributing copies of his letter, which,
good man, as the time drew near he gave away in bundles, thirteen to the
dozen, to any body that would accept of them, that he took no manner of
heed to his steps, and so entirely lost himself." William Whiston had
escaped, however. "On the first beginning of the trembling, [he] set out on
foot for Dover, on his way to Jerusalem, where he has made an appointment
to meet the Millennium: it is thought, if he makes tolerable haste, he will
arrive there first." Such levity undoubtedly helped Londoners put their
ordeal behind them. Yet five years later in 1755, consternation about earth­
quakes would again resurface with the massive devastation that befell
Lisbon on All Saints' Day.

72 The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A., 2:69-70. See also "Historical Chronicle,"
73A Full and True Account of the Dreadful and Melancholy Earthquake which happened
between twelve and one o'Clock in the Morning, on Thursday the 5th of April, 1750, with an
exact List of such persons as have hitherto been found in the Rubbish. In a Letter from a
Gentleman in Town, to his Friend in the Country (London: Printed by J. Debrett, 1798) 6, 9.
Although England was far removed from the immediate destruction, the catastrophe of Lisbon added energy to the literary production, both scientific and theological, that had continued in the intervening years since the London quakes. Earlier, in June of that year, Charles Wesley's brother John, while visiting the village of Osmotherley, learned of a recent "convulsion of nature" that had taken place at nearby Whitson (Whitestone) Cliffs and went to investigate. His eye-witness account and analysis of the situation, which was published in several versions, eventually became part of his Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Earthquake at Lisbon first published anonymously in late 1755. Discounting fire, water, and air as causes of the Whitson Cliffs disturbance, John Wesley "proved" the divine origin of the event – which he identified as an earthquake – and went on to claim, as his brother had done, that such phenomena are used by God to show God's greatness and power as well as human finitude. Twenty-two years later, he would effectively summarize his Serious Thoughts with the statement, "There is no divine visitation which is likely to have so general an influence upon sinners as an earthquake."

In response to the Lisbon tragedy, the earthquake hymns were reprinted in 1755, and in 1756 a new text each was added to Part I and Part II. The new hymns recapitulate the central themes and emphases of the hymns in the first edition, but perhaps with a greater intensity to match the magnitude of Lisbon's desolation by shaking earth, fire, and tsunami. There is a stronger sense of urgency in these later hymns, in their identification of the earthquake as God's judgment, their call to repentance, and their proclamation that the day of the Lord – and God's new creation – is surely nigh.

Added to Part I is "An Hymn upon the pouring out of the Seventh Vial" that was "Occasioned by the Destruction of Lisbon" and inspired by "Revelation 16, 17 &c." Although Charles Wesley did not abandon his characteristic use of a chain of diverse but related scriptural allusions, the development of the hymn directly follows the sequence of chapters in the Bible's last book. The hymn is divided into two parts of five stanzas each. The first part focuses upon God's wrath and earth's destruction from which England is not immune while the second part invites the singer into the security of the Savior and his coming reign. In the second part, Charles returned to the metaphor of the rock, "the everlasting Rock/ Is cleft to take us..."
The contrast between the two parts of the hymn, and the anticipation the first part is intended to produce, is evident when the final two stanzas of each part are examined together:

Lo! from their roots the mountains leap;
    The mountains are not found;
Transported far into the deep,
    And in the ocean drown'd.
Jesus descends in dread array
    To judge the scarlet whore:
And every isle is fled away,
    And Britain is no more!

She sinks beneath her ambient flood,
    And never more shall rise;
The earth is gone, on which we stood,
    The old creation dies!
Who then shall live, and face the throne,
    And face the Judge severe?
When heaven and earth are fled and gone,
    O where shall I appear?

Yet still the Lord, the Saviour reigns,
    When nature is destroy'd,
And no created thing remains
    Throughout the flaming void.
Sublime upon His azure throne,
    He speaks the' almighty word:
His fiat is obey'd! 'tis done;
    And Paradise restored.

So be it! let this system end,
    This ruinos earth and skies;
The New Jerusalem descend,
    The new creation rise.
Thy power omnipotent assume;
    Thy brightest majesty!
And when Thou dost in glory come,
    My Lord, remember me!

The new hymn in Part II, under the general heading “A Hymn for the Year 1756,” consists of eight stanzas that, like its counterpart, progresses from warning of “the dread ills to come” to anticipation of that day when, “God with dreadful pomp comes down / To'erect His kingdom here.” In effect, the final hymn summarizes the entirety of Part II that, more so than in Part I, has a clear movement from judgment to heaven. The first stanza alludes to Noah and the ark, thereby creating a link with the sixth stanza in which hints are given to the waves that flooded Lisbon (“What ails thee, O thou sea, / To start out of thy bed?”). The final stanza articulates the prayer of the faithful of every generation:
“On The Occasion”

Eternal Judge of all,
Thy people's Advocate,
In faith we for Thy coming call,
And for Thy kingdom wait;
Assume Thy royal power,
And bear our souls away
To sing, and triumph, and adore
Through one eternal day.

With the publication of both parts of his *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake, March 8, 1750*, Charles Wesley endeavored to combine theological interpretation with pastoral care in the face of current events and a national crisis. The hymns, drawing from the fullness of the scriptural witness but especially from the Psalms, the prophet Isaiah, and the Revelation of John, were intended to provide a warning but also reassurance, precisely what Wesley construed to be the purpose of the earthquakes themselves. Intended for the singing and prayerful reflection of the faithful, the neglectful, and the hardened sinner, the hymns were simultaneously catechetical and evangelical. But Charles also had an agenda beyond amplification of the phenomenon of earthquakes, namely, to prove that scientific explanations were generally insufficient (and even arrogant), that God was still intimately involved in the world’s affairs, and that attacks on Christ’s church and its doctrine had merited God’s displeasure.

Certain of the earthquake hymns were published in later collections, three in the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, though not entirely in their original versions, and three – again not in their original form – in the 1870 *British Methodist Hymn-Book*. Twenty-first century singers will not find these texts among their standard repertoire. Nevertheless, both parts of the *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake, March 8, 1750* provide a model for a hymnic synthesis of both theological integrity and cultural awareness, and the need, as always, to provide liturgical materials “on the occasion.”