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# The locust theology of Ernst Ludwig Rathlef

Adam Drozdek

## Abstract

The article discusses Rathlef's locust theology as delineated in his two-volume work, *Akridotheologie*. The work is part of the physico-theological movement which flourished in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe. With historical and biological information about the locusts that plagued Europe, Rathlef wanted to show the providential care of God in addressing people's physical needs and spiritual deficiencies.

## Keywords

Ernst Ludwig Rathlef; physico-theology; akrido-theology; locust

Ernst Ludwig Rathlef (1709–1768) was a German theologian educated at the University of Helmstedt who in 1744 was a pastor in Langenhagen and a superintendent in Diepholz, and in 1752, a pastor in Nienburg (all cities in Lower Saxony). He was the publisher of the weekly *Der Theologe* (1754–1756) continued as *Der Gottesgelehrte* (1757–1758) and then as *Sonntagsblatt* (1759). He also published numerous theological articles and pamphlets, but his largest theological work was written in the spirit of physico-theology, which was very popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which he offered theological and moral lessons to be derived from the investigation of locusts.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Preaching

Locusts fairly often ravaged Europe, providing fertile ground for preaching. Here are some examples of the locust-related messages from just one year, 1693, of those who witnessed the devastation.

Jacob Crell, a pastor from Roda (now Stadtroda) in Thuringia, listed the following uses of locusts: I. As a teaching tool (17)<sup>2</sup>: God sent locusts because of human sins (18); it is not enough that God sent a plague, but the importance of this event has to be accompanied by preaching to hardened, unrepented sinners to bring them to repentance; otherwise, they would ignore the event (19). II. Such plagues are sent also as admonition for 1. negligence (20); Pliny called it *ira deorum*, so Christians should consider it a punishment (23) of God and remember that they deserve worse for their sins; 2. impenitence (24). III. As an exhortation and a call to 1. the improvement of human lives: plagues are not sent to destroy people, but to heal them, to awaken the despisers of His word (26); 2. sincere prayer (29). Consequences of locust plagues: 1. shortages and hunger, 2. pestilence/epidemic, 3. poisoning of fields (30), 4. war (31). IV. For consolation: 1. God sends plagues, God can withdraw them, so prayer is a good defense (32); 2. God can restore losses; 3. God can send help (34).

Gottfried Erhard Feßken, a pastor from Zinna and Welsau by Torgau in Saxony, said that plagues are a punishment of God to wake people to repentance and to the improvement of their lives ([4]).<sup>3</sup> God uses nature to accomplish something and locusts are one such means ([8]). It is a superstition that the locust plagues are created by magic and devil's help ([9]). Locust, as God's rod, is an expression of His wrath ([10]), caused by 1. neglect or even disdain for Sundays; 2. misuse of God's gifts and ingratitude for daily bread ([11]); 3. mistreatment of neighbors and excessive pride in one's own accomplish-

1 Johann Anton Trinius, *Beytrag zu einer Geschichte berühmter und verdienster Gottesgelehrten*, Leipzig: Carl Ludwig Jacobi 1751, vol. 1, pp. 521–534; 1753, vol. 2, pp. 215–218; Johann Georg Meusel, *Lexikon der vom Jahr 1750 bis 1800 verstorbenen teutschen Schriftsteller*, Leipzig: Gerhard Fleischer 1811, vol. 11, pp. 54–57.

2 Jacob Crell, *Das grosse Heuschrecken-Heer Gottes, Welches Am 17. Augusti, Anno 1693. zum ersten mahl in und umb Roda nicht ohne Schrecken gesehen worden*, Jena [1693].

3 Gottfried Erhard Feßken, *Gottes des HErrn Zebaoth bedenkliches Heuschrecken-Heer, welches neulichster Zeit hier und da, in- und ausserhalb Landes, sich in ungewöhnlicher Menge hat sehen lassen*, Leipzig: Friedrich Lanckische Erben 1693; no pagination.

ments ([12]). The appearance of locusts “never means anything good.” Locusts are a tool of divine wrath and a warning about an imminent general punishment of the land ([14]). An unusual amount of locusts means 1. an imminent war that devastates a land ([15]); 2. a horrible pestilence/epidemic ([17]); 3. the death of cattle ([18]); 4. severe shortages and hunger ([19]); 5. the emergence of false religious teachers ([20]). Sincere prayers along with genuine repentance are the surest way to end a plague ([23]). Moreover, ants, locusts, and spiders are considered wiser than sages (Prov. 30:24–28). People can learn from locusts 1. the commendable obedience to God ([26]); 2. the order and harmony in their ranks ([27]); and 3. the loyalty and love to their fatherland ([28]).

Caspar Neumann, a pastor from Breslau (now Wrocław), said that God punishes people with locusts (61).<sup>4</sup> God, the creator of nature including locusts, directs the movements of their swarms (63). They move in an orderly fashion (64). People anger God every day; also, locusts show God’s power and divinity (69). Nowhere in the Bible does it say that God uses locusts as a sign of future calamity (70). Here are the reasons for their appearance: 1. locusts show the wisdom of God (72); locusts come to our land by God’s command (73); 2. goodness and mercy of God is manifested when locusts make less damage than expected; and 3. locusts show the omnipotence of God (74).

The theologian Johann Paul Hebenstreit stated in a brief sermon that God delays people’s well-deserved punishment and sends His messengers to call people to repentance, which he illustrated with many historical accounts ([1]). History teaches that locusts bring plague and punishment, leaving little time to repent and people should begin a new life and turn away from the world toward Christ ([7]).<sup>5</sup>

In all this, these messages are rather damning for the populations affected by locusts. One anonymous author tried to be cute about it by having this title of his booklet: *Frag: was bedeuten die Heuschrecken? Ecco: Schröcken!*: What do locusts (*Heuschrecken*) mean? Echo: Terror (*Schröcken*)!<sup>6</sup>

Can anything else be expected from a two-volume theological treatment of locusts?

## 2 Locusts

The *Akridotheologie* came out in two volumes within a span of two years, with the second volume largely rewriting large portions of the first. About one-third of the work is a collection of the many reports on locusts, starting with Aristotle. One of the briefest reports states that in 1535, in Poland, “A strong west wind dragged them from Turkey. Their number was astoundingly large. Their color was gold-yellow mixed with gray. They had

4 Caspar Neumann, *Heuschrecken: ein Heer des HERRN der Heerschaaren* [1693], in his: *Allerhand gesammelte Früchte von mancherley Art*, Breslau: Johann Georg Steck 1707, pp. 53–76.

5 Johann Paul Hebenstreit, *Schädlich- und schrecklicher Heer-Zug der Heuschrecken*, Leipzig 1693, no pagination.

6 Anonymous, *Frag: was bedeuten die Heuschrecken? Ecco: Schröcken!*, Augspurg 1750, this question and answer are used repetitively in the pamphlet, pp. 4–6, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, 21, including the last sentence, p. 23.

four wings. The damage they inflicted was great and universal” (1.48)<sup>7</sup>; some reports run for several pages and, rather expectedly, they are benumbingly repetitious.

From all the published reports, Rathlef provided a composite description of a locust, although he had some problems with occasionally conflicting descriptions of some details. The head is about the ninth of its length, round at the top, with long forehead running down and with a wide mouth directed downwards with two teeth as hard as stone (1.63); the eyes are made out of countless number of hexagons. There are two horns behind the eyes. The hind side consists of seven sections (64) with two appendages attached to each section whereby the size of these sections can be controlled. The rear side is covered with four wings covered by a cap, smaller wings below the larger ones. They are made from a delicate tissue and two wings would not be sufficient to carry an insect. An insect has six legs underneath the front side, each leg consisting of three parts. The four front legs are small; the hind legs are unusually large (65) and are used for jumping, allowing for jumps two ells high [about one meter] (66). They are of the size of a finger (67).

The description is not very detailed, likely because, at the time of writing the first volume, Rathlef had apparently never seen a locust. Only before writing the second volume, in 1748, did he receive one locust preserved in alcohol (*spiritus vini*) from Shaw from London (2.121, 172, 178, 180). This allowed him to provide a considerably more detailed description of the locust’s mouth (182), neck (184), chest (186), rear side (187), wings (194), legs (197), and eyes (211). Only in the second volume is there some description of inner parts. Here is a portion of the description of entrails: “From the throat through the chest and the whole body to its end, there is a single, straight and equally wide intestine in which there is a sour and yellowish fluid (217). In the breast some tender flesh joins from above to this intestine, which, if you take it down (218), has the shape of a star with six spikes between which, in turn, six smaller spikes emerge (219). In the middle, this fleshy star is slightly raised, which at times allows us to see two pieces of flesh lying on top of each other. From each spike of this star, a few thin threads, or rather tubes, run downwards toward the body. If the star is cut, a small drop of bright fluid appears. Even though this star has no compressive force like hearts do (220), it distributes its fluid through the little tubes in the body. It gives the flesh its fluids and it gives the long intestine its acidic moisture. And as some tubes go to the inner parts, which are designed to preserve the locust species, these too will benefit from the fluid of this star” (221).

It is important that Rathlef wanted to use the locust plague for religious purposes, yet he aimed to explain the phenomenon itself in a purely naturalist manner. However, the Biblical locust plague in Egypt was a miracle. To accomplish it, God did not need to create new locusts; He used those already in existence and guided their swarm to Egypt. He acted wisely not doing anything unnecessary and He creates nothing new when what has been already created suffices (1.154-155). So, are post-Biblical locust plagues miraculous or not? It appears that it may depend on the point of view. A plague can be explained purely naturalistically: its place of origin (Asia and Africa (1.84; 2.165)), the occurrence

7 References are made to a volume and a page of Ernst Ludwig Rathlef, *Akridotheologie oder historische und theologische Betrachtungen über die Heuschrecken*, Hannover: Johann Christoph Richter 1748, vol. 1; 1750, vol. 2; ἄκρις (genitive: ἀκριδος) – locust.

of favorable winds blowing them toward particular lands, or, for that matter, away from these lands. The way they feed and multiply can be explained in biological terms. However, God created the world along with all the natural laws, so, indirectly, God does have a control over natural events. What would count as a miracle would be an event clearly violating natural laws. As Rathlef argued, such miracles were necessary at the origin of Christianity to buttress its legitimacy. In particular, miracles were means to prove that Jesus was a Messiah.<sup>8</sup> The reason for miracles is to convince the world about the divine provenance of the message that the obedience to the will of the Savior is the only way to the eternal happiness. Miracles also helped to spread the message of the cross, which was their main purposes for the first Christians. Miracles, however, stopped and the time of miracles had passed. For this reason, Rathlef considered Constantine's vision in the 4<sup>th</sup> century to be doubtful.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 Harm and benefit

When a swarm of locusts arrives at some place, they eat all greenery and no place is free of them. "The damage that they leave behind is even more severe. Hunger, shortages, and poverty, looking at the cattle calling for food (1.92), children sighing for bread, flight, illness and often the death of hundreds of thousands of people are likely some consequences. The weak/poor and often unhealthy food, and the air spoiled by the death and decomposition of entire swarms of locusts must cause the death among cattle and people. An army may well devastate a country for a year, but the following year will bring its growth back. However, a single swarm of locusts is much worse and its damage extends longer into the time that follows" (93; 2.242-252). In this, Rathlef expressed very much the same sentiment as the preachers when they used locusts in their sermons.

There are some countermeasures, some more, some less effective that people can use to fight this scourge: shouting and making loud noises to scare them away (1.98, 2.256), or using ditches filled with water, and fire (1.100, 2.254). Moreover, nets can be used to catch them (1.104), cattle can be used to trample them (2.254), and many more methods have been tried (2.253-257).<sup>10</sup>

Are there any benefits from locusts? Since God does nothing in vain (2.293), locusts were not created by mistake. "Nothing is so black, harmful and severe which would not have anything beneficial, and thus these bitter insects bring some honey" (2.242). They are nourishment for thousands of people and for birds. Some tribes collected locusts

8 Ernst Ludewig Rathleff, *Gedanken von der Lästerung des heiligen Geistes*, Wolfenbüttel: Johann Christoph Meißner 1735<sup>2</sup> [1733], p. 72.

9 Ernst Ludewig Rathleff, *Betrachtungen über unterschiedene Wahrheiten der geistlichen Wissenschaften*, Wolfenbüttel 1737, pp. 6, 7, 21, 45.

10 See also Jana Sprenger, Von Raupen und Heuschrecken. Der Umgang mit schädlichen Tieren im vorindustriellen Brandenburg, in: M. Jakubowski-Tiessen, J. Sprenger (eds.), *Natur und Gesellschaft Perspektiven der interdisziplinären Umweltgeschichte*, Universitätsverlag Göttingen 2014, pp. 191–218; Jana Sprenger, An ocean of locusts – the perception and control of insect pests in Prussian Brandenburg (1700–1850), *Environment and History* 21 (2015), pp. 513–536.

and fed on them for a year. It was preserved by drying it on the sun or by keeping it in salt water (1.109; 2.277).<sup>11</sup> And so, God's wisdom is seen in that locusts that destroy food, itself can become food (1.130), which elicited Rathlef's exclamation: "I believe that I can extol God's mercy toward men, that he every year gives the locusts to the akridophagians, who are starving to death in their country, so that they might want to have their livelihood from them" (133). Locusts can also be used as medicine, food for animals (2.280), and fertilizer (282).

## 4 Akrido-theology

One theological message can be derived from an investigation of just one insect. This is a remarkable makeup of a tiny creature, no larger than a finger. Consider the numerous body parts of a locust, their structure, and arrangement – all testifying to God's wisdom. The makeup of a locust's body is a testimony of the greatness of God's intellect and wisdom: all the inner parts are perfectly harmonized, and so are its outer parts to properly maintain the life of the insect. For example, its mouth is wide and equipped with a tooth-like structure (1.126) to reach and grind grass or other food. The green land-locust (*Landheuschrecken*) has at its mouth four tiny fingers equipped with joints to fold food and put it quickly in its mouth. The two horns above its eyes are used to protect the eyes and the face (127), and thus, locusts, just like other tiny creatures, deserve to be admired as God's masterpieces (128). The incomprehensible wisdom of God can be seen in the fact that thousands of eggs can be contained in one locust (129). "A master-builder who puts together in one building thousand various parts is considered wise ... What Master in creation must God be who creates not only millions upon millions of locusts, but also a hundred thousand other kinds of creatures and of each kind an innumerable amount [of individuals] and in each creature puts together such a variety of parts? Powerless man, build just one locust" (2.289).

That is true; however, such reflections can easily be made when investigating one insect in the quiet of one's office under the microscope, but hardly anyone whose fields have been ravaged by locusts will be overcome by such reflections. On the other hand, God's wisdom and goodness can also be detected in the time of hardship caused by locusts.

Religious lessons brought by locusts are most important. Locusts are a testimony to God's omniscience, wisdom, power, justice, and love (2.276). Also, reflecting on locusts "should strengthen [the belief in] the existence (*Dasein*) of God and the majestic attributes which reason and Scripture ascribe to our God, which should lead us to [the fulfill-

11 The use of locusts as food for humans and animals was discussed at that time in some detail, cf. *Sammlung merkwürdiger Nachrichten von den Land-vererblichen Heuschrecken*, Franckfurt am Mayn 1750, pp. 15–19; Johann Georg Krünitz, *Oekonomische Encyclopädie*, Berlin: Joachim Pauli 1781, vol. 23, pp. 491–495, although there were concerns that it may be, in the long run, harmful, *Sammlung*, p. 20, Krünitz, pp. 495–496. It was recognized that in Europe, locusts would be considered rather offputting food, but, as dryly observed by Krünitz, p. 489, at that time, when discussing this issue, to many eating snails and frogs would be hardly alluring.

ment of] some duties which people owe God, their neighbor, and themselves” (1.118).

“First, the locusts put this truth before our eyes that there is a God. Even the heathen have recognized this when they have not looked at this vermin carelessly, but with some consideration” (1.118). The Scriptures confirm it when they generally state that the being of God can be recognized in His works, all works, even in locusts (119). So, what should people do when the locust plague comes? They should recognize their duties to God, the first duty being raising one’s eyes to God to recognize His existence, to consider His attributes and accept His rule. The second duty is to consider the plague as an affliction to make people reflect whether they expressed praise, love, and obedience to God and whether they brought it upon themselves through their misdeeds. The third duty is to turn themselves to God and ask Him for ending the plague. The fourth duty is “to kiss the rod (*Ruthe*)” and knowing that they deserved it, they should trust in God’s mercy (137). The fifth duty is to serve God. As to those who were not afflicted by locusts, their most important duty is to glorify God by recognizing His existence (138). Second, they should express their respect of God in the heart and in speech. Their third duty is to trust God (139). Fourth, they should express their gratitude that He spared them this plague, which could just as well have fallen upon them (140).

People also have duties toward the victims of plagues. First, people should not feel that they are better than those afflicted by locusts and should beware of meeting with the same fate. Second, they should express pity (1.141), presumably, in deed, by helping those affected by the plague.

Finally, there are duties toward oneself: first, “we magnify our respect for God through an investigation of the creation of God” (1.142), appreciating its variety, and the interrelations among its elements. “We truly should care for our souls that will not see God in eternity if He remains unknown to us on earth” (143). So, the spiritual message is here most important. This can be better comprehended if people can see the big picture as delineated by Rathlef in his essay, “On the great final goal of God in creating the world.”<sup>12</sup>

God was not motivated by His own pleasure when creating the world, although He was pleased with it (19). Although God is worthy of praise because of His creation, He did not create the world to be praised (20), since few people praise God and God does not have to seek praise outside of Himself (21), each Person of the Trinity sufficiently honoring the other Persons. His purpose in creating the world was the world itself. His goal was to have something outside Himself upon which He could bestow charity (*wolthue*). For an analogy, consider an honest person who is pleased with making others happy (22). To that end, all living beings were created and, most of all on earth, humans.<sup>13</sup> The inanimate nature was created to serve the living creatures to be happy

12 E[rnst] L[udwig] R[athlef], Von dem grossen Endzweck Gottes bei der Verfertigung der Welt, *Der Gottesgelehrte* 3 (1757–1758), cols. 17–28.

13 Rathlef did not have a problem with the possibility of other celestial bodies being inhabited; he only did not have any solution about how they are saved; he left it to God’s wisdom how other worlds were saved, E[rnst] L[udwig] R[athlef], Mein Zusaz [zu: O.Z., 5. Problem. Erstreckt sich Jesu Versöhnung über alle Welten?], *Der Gottesgelehrte* 5 (1758), col. 40.

(23). Making others happy was the big goal; the subsidiary goal was that rational creatures should know God from His creation to glorify and serve Him (24). The works of God are the ladder leading to Him, with the last rung being the revealed word about salvation through Jesus. The fear, love, and obedience of God are the true happiness (25).

## Conclusion

The salvation message was what Rathlef eventually wanted the reader to take from his writings and he saw his physico-theological take to constitute a rung on the ladder leading to the revelation. Many physico-theologians were competent naturalists using their own research to arrive at the same goal. Rathlef was a casual observer of nature. He asked the reader not to require of him to perform similar investigations as naturalists did since he “is not used to deal with an autopsy knife and magnifying lenses” (2.178). For the most part, he viewed nature “through someone else’s (*fremden*) eyes” (227). What is interesting, is the choice of the subject. It can be said that it is much easier to argue for the existence of God and for His wisdom, love, and providential care when looking at the motion of celestial bodies, at plants, especially flowers, at the makeup of the human body, etc. which were extensively investigated by physico-theologians. It is much harder to make such a case when taking for a subject, for example, thunderstorms (Ahlwardt), earthquakes (Preu), or, indeed, locusts. In that case, it is easy to say, along with many preachers, that God uses locusts to afflict sinners (1.124). But the goodness of God? Rathlef did not shun from this and tried to provide some purely physical arguments (locusts as food or as medicine), but, from his pastoral point of view, afflicting sinners is the sign of God’s love and mercy since through this affliction God tries to bring these sinners to His fold, which has eternal consequences.

## Literature

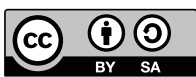
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