

What is God Saying Through ‘Natural Disasters’?

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KEY WORDS

| Earthquake | Natural Disasters | Amos |
| Armenia | Tsunami | Prophecy | Job |

ABSTRACT

Many Christians struggle with the question of why God allows ‘natural disasters’ such as earthquakes. This paper presents a perspective on this question with particular reference to the Armenian earthquake of 1988, noting how there were parallels between the situation in Armenia and that of Israel at the time of the prophet Amos. In both cases, the earthquake might be interpreted not only as a judgement from God but also as a means by which some people are brought to recognise their need of God. Christian researchers are encouraged to seek God in discerning insights into why disasters occur at specific times or places, and the spiritual impact that they have on local residents.

CAN WE SAY THAT ‘NATURAL DISASTERS’ ARE SENT BY GOD?

At least since the writing of the book of Job (and probably long before), human minds have struggled to make sense of suffering. This struggle is particularly acute when the suffering impacts those who appear to be morally upright; this question of theodicy is further complicated if one also believes that God is fundamentally good. It is relatively simple to assert that the majority of suffering is caused by human beings themselves, resulting from greed and selfishness which leads people to steal, exploit others or fight fellow human beings – often to gain access to resources. However, one cannot so easily blame human sin for natural disasters - which insurance companies describe as ‘acts of God’.

Nevertheless, some Christians attempt to explain natural disasters as also resulting from human sin, in so far as God said to Adam and

Eve, ‘cursed is the ground because of you’ - although the specific examples following this statement refer to thorns and thistles rather than natural disasters (Genesis 3:17-19). In a more general sense, a link between human sin and the defilement of God’s natural creation is indicated by Romans 8:19-22, which states that the creation ‘waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.’¹ Other biblical passages, such as

¹ Biblical quotations are from the New International Version (London, Sydney, Auckland: Hodder and

Leviticus 18:25, 28, Isaiah 24:5-6 and Jeremiah 2:7; 3:2-3, 9 refer to the land or ground being defiled by sin. Elsewhere in the Bible drought, a natural disaster, is described as a consequence of sin: the warning in Deuteronomy 28:22-23 that scorching heat and drought can be a punishment for sin is graphically illustrated by the three year drought during the reign of Ahab when the prophet Elijah was challenging the king about the consequences of his promoting idolatry (1 Kings chapters 17 and 18; James 5:17-18).

Apart from a general connection between natural disasters and human sin, those trying to explain in theological terms why natural disasters occur tend to take one of three main positions: (1) these are acts of God; (2) the disasters must be from evil powers, because God is good; (3) natural phenomena are neutral in themselves and cannot be said to be specifically under the control of spiritual powers, whether these are regarded as good or evil entities. Some biblical support could be claimed for each of these positions. For example, the view that these are from God could be supported by passages such as the collapse of the walls of Jericho (possibly caused by an earthquake) in Joshua chapter 6. However, the 'mighty wind' that killed Job's children (Job 1:19) was evidently sent by Satan, just as the storm on the lake in Mark 4:37-39 appeared to have been sent by evil powers seeking to kill Jesus and his disciples.² Jesus rebuked the wind (or the demonic powers controlling it) in the same way as he rebuked unclean spirits. Satan's ability to control or use the wind might be related to the description of demonic forces in Ephesians 6:12

Stoughton, 2006), unless otherwise stated.

2 This interpretation is derived from John Wimber, who at one of his conferences linked the storm on the lake with the fact that Jesus was on his way to Gadarene territory, where he would deliver a demonic from many evil spirits.

as 'powers of this dark world' and as 'spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms', while the 'prince of this world' mentioned in John 14:30 appears also to refer to Satan. In Job 1:16 Satan was apparently able to send a lightning bolt to destroy Job's sheep and servants, mimicking phenomena that at other times was sent by God (1 Kings 18:38; 2 Chronicles 7:1).³ Nevertheless, Satan's power is still limited. As the 'ruler of the kingdom of the air' (Ephesians 2:2) perhaps his powers extend to some control over wind and lightning, producing counterfeit miracles (Revelation 13:13) but nowhere in the Bible are earthquakes attributed to Satan. On the contrary, in Revelation 12:16 'the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth' to protect her from the dragon; similarly, in Numbers 16:30-33 it is clearly God who causes the earth to open up to swallow up those rebelling against Moses. A divine perspective is presented in chapters 38 to 41 of the book of Job, focussing attention on God's power and wisdom in creation, which Satan is unable to counterfeit: the works of creation underline the strong affirmation in Psalm 24:1 that 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it'.

Support for the third position, that the natural phenomena are neutral in themselves, comes from 1 Kings 19:11-13 which states that

3 This might be why Job's servant who survived to tell the tale described it as "the fire of God" (Job 1:16). Whether or not the servant was aware of other such incidents depends on the dating of the book of Job, which is problematic because of the absence of clear dating markers apart from the mention of Job by Ezekiel (14:14; 14:20). The view that Job lived in the patriarchal period is largely an inference from the absence of any references to Levites or the temple in the context of Job's sacrifices - but this also assumes that Job was actually a Jew. He lived in the 'land of Uz', not in Israel. Although Uz as a personal name is mentioned in Genesis 10:23, a territory called Uz is only mentioned at the time of Jeremiah (25: 20; Lamentations 4: 21) and was associated with the land of Edom. If this gives an approximate dating for an entity called 'the land of Uz', it is possible that Job's servant would have been aware of the 'fire of God' that had fallen in response to the prayers of Solomon and Elijah.

the Lord was not in the powerful wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire, but his presence was made known through a 'gentle whisper' - better known to many as the 'still, small voice' of the Authorised (King James) Version. In this paper I am not advocating any of these positions - nor trying to set up a 'straw man' to argue against any other viewpoint - because the actual situation is likely to be more complex than our human reasoning can understand. A hint of this comes from the book of Job, most of which focusses on the humanly visible events. Although Job and his friends saw the impact of natural phenomena and recognised that God spoke to them out of a storm (Job 38:1), they did not know that it was Satan who had used a powerful wind to destroy Job's children. Their knowledge, like ours, was partial. A natural phenomenon, wind, was used by Satan to kill Job's children but the event was also allowed by God. From a human, temporal perspective this was a great tragedy. On the other hand, from the perspective of eternity, perhaps the interval between the children entering into God's heavenly kingdom and being joined there by their father might seem to be almost instantaneous.⁴ Hence such events can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

In the first two chapters of the book of Job, the writer was apparently granted an insight into the unseen, spiritual realm which shows that, even though Satan was allowed to attack Job's family and possessions, God's authority is greater than that of Satan. We do not know how the information in Job chapters 1 and 2 was revealed to the writer but elsewhere in the Bible there are people who are given glimpses into

the unseen realm by means of visions, such as those given to Isaiah (6:1-13) or Daniel (10:1). Sometimes the revelation is auditory, the classic example being that of Samuel as a boy, although in 1 Samuel 3:15 it is referred to as a 'vision'.⁵ At times the one receiving the vision seems to be transported to another place (Ezekiel 3:12-15; 8:3; 11:1; Revelation chapters 4-22).⁶ Sometimes a message, or divine guidance, can come through a dream (e.g. Jeremiah 31:26; Matthew 2:12); at times an angel can appear in the dream (Matthew 1:20; 2:19) but at other times the information can come through an angelic appearance while the person is awake (e.g. Luke 1:11-20, 26-38; Acts 10:3). We are not told how prophets such as Isaiah or Jeremiah received the majority of their revelations but some clues might be given by the contemporary experiences of Christians who receive what the Authorised Version in 1 Corinthians 12:8 translates as a 'word of knowledge' and in the NIV is called a 'message of knowledge'. As no further explanation is given, the term must have been familiar to Paul's readers.⁷ Nowadays we may have to infer its meaning on the basis of other biblical passages (e.g. John 4:16-19; Acts 5:1-11) in which knowledge is conveyed supernaturally. To some extent contemporary experience can also influence modern interpretations of this

4 It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the relationships between time and eternity, our understanding of which is limited. Nevertheless, it could be noted that some of these issues are analogous to the concept of 'time dilation' in modern Physics, according to which time is perceived or experienced differently by different observers. This concept is based on Einstein's theory of relativity.

5 Examples of auditory revelations in my own experience are detailed in Hope Price's book *Angels: True stories of how they touch our lives* (London: Pan Books, 1994), p. 143 and in David C. Lewis *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 351, note 31.

6 A very detailed account of a near-death experience recounted by George Ritchie in his book *Return from Tomorrow* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1978) has a structure which is similar to that of the book of Revelation. Near the beginning of the experience Ritchie was in this world when he found himself in the presence of Jesus Christ, from whom bright light was radiating. Jesus then took Ritchie to various other places before finally giving him a glimpse of a beautiful city of light.

7 This is discussed in more detail in my book *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), pp. 129, 345-346 note 1.

expression. Among the 1,890 people who filled in a questionnaire for me at the end of a Christian conference, 444 said that they had received a 'word of knowledge' by means of an inner conviction or 'strong intuition'.⁸ Other forms of communication included a mental picture (175 cases), 'spontaneous utterance' (97 cases), a pain in part of the body that was believed to be showing the location of someone else's pain (57 cases), seeing words written (38 cases) and various 'other' methods (31 cases).⁹ God is not limited to this repertoire of communication channels but these statistics give an indication of the relative frequency of various means that are reported nowadays.¹⁰

God can also speak in various ways to those who do not know him. Besides what can be discerned through creation (Romans 1:20), or the voice of conscience (Romans 2:15), God can sometimes speak through dreams or visions. In some cases the meaning is clear to the recipients themselves (e.g. Genesis 20:3-7; Matthew 27:19) but in many cases the interpretation of the dream is given through a man of God such as Joseph with Pharaoh (Genesis 41) or Daniel with Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel chapters 2 and 4). In such cases the man of God was given a gift of discernment. A principle mentioned in 1 Corinthians 2:14 is that in such cases the spiritual insights come from the Spirit of God: we are not told exactly how they received the

interpretations but it was probably through processes similar to those listed above as ways in which 'words of knowledge' are received today.¹¹ In general, the source of a spiritual revelation can be tested by its content (1 John 4:2-3; 1 Corinthians 12:3) and by its effects (Matthew 7:15-17), as I have discussed elsewhere.¹² Some people also report seeing an evil spirit, which sometimes is described as having an appearance like that of an animal.¹³

Although the dreams given to Pharaoh in Genesis 41 foretold immutable future events, the warning enabled him to take action in the present to avoid some of the future consequences; the same principle applied to the prediction given to Agabus about the famine in the reign of Claudius, the effects of which could be mitigated by acting on the information (Acts 11:27-30). Other disasters, or events such as the exile to Babylon, could be averted by repentance: if people repented - as the people of Nineveh did in response to the prophecy of Jonah (3:1-10) - the disaster would not happen. Although sometimes the occurrence, or otherwise, of various disasters was conditional upon human responsiveness to divine warnings, in other cases the disaster occurred

8 John Wimber, the main speaker at that conference, described this kind of deep inner conviction as "knowing in your knower"!

9 David C. Lewis *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact?* op. cit., p. 138.

10 A mental image involving seeing written words is a form of communication that not only entails literacy but is also linguistically bounded, indicating that the message is geared to the cultural context of the recipient. The use of mental pictures to convey a prophetic message may be implied by passages such as Jeremiah 24 or Amos 7:1-9 in which the prophet is shown something (figs, locusts, fire, a plumb-line) and the meaning of the image is then explained through dialogue with the prophet.

11 In my book *After Atheism: Religion and Ethnicity in Russia and Central Asia* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press and New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000; New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p. 58 I suggest that some dreams can be like parables - that is, a pictorial or story-like depiction of a spiritual truth, often illustrating the inner state of a person. Some popular manuals of dream interpretation and some forms of psychoanalysis tend to see a one-to-one correlation between a certain symbol and its meaning but this approach seems to be too simplistic because the same symbols can have different meanings in different cultures, or even among different people within a culture. In trying to interpret these kinds of dreams one needs to be sensitive to the Spirit of God, who might give an inner conviction of the meaning or show how the dream relates to an event in the person's life, such as a trauma that needs healing.

12 David C. Lewis 'Spiritual Powers' - *Genuine and Counterfeit* in Michael Cole, Jim Graham, Tony Highton and David Lewis *What is the New Age?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), pp. 110-120.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

but some people were miraculously saved out of it. For example, Noah and his family were saved because they heeded the warning and acted upon it.¹⁴ Similarly, God sent angels to warn Lot about the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: he was saved but the young men who wanted to marry Lot's daughters did not take the warning seriously and ended up as disaster casualties (Genesis 19:14).

THE ARMENIAN EARTHQUAKE

A particularly sensitive and potentially controversial area concerns a suggested interpretation of natural disasters as signs of God's judgement. It is difficult to make such claims without appearing to be insensitive to human suffering. In 1988 I found myself in this very position when I believed that God had given me insights into some of the reasons he had allowed a major earthquake in Armenia to occur.

At that time I had already been conducting research on the dispute between Azerbaijan

and Armenia over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh – an area populated primarily by ethnic Armenians which for various political reasons had ended up as an enclave within Azerbaijan. The Armenians were wanting it to be reassigned to Armenia and were seizing the chance afforded by Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) to express their demands for the boundaries to be redrawn. In what follows I shall attempt to summarise a fairly complicated perspective on the Armenian earthquake which came to me unexpectedly in the course of my research on the dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. In December 1988 I would have been in the region itself had not the Soviet authorities cancelled visits to the area by Westerners on account of the unrest, demonstrations and incipient violence. Therefore, on hearing news of the severe earthquake in northern Armenia at that time, my initial reaction was to go into my bedroom, kneel down and ask God two questions: "Why now?" and "Why Armenia?". Somehow in my spirit I felt that it was connected with the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Immediately into my mind came two passages from the biblical prophecy of Amos.¹⁵ The book opens with the statement that his prophecy was given 'two years before the earthquake', when Uzziah was king of Judah (Amos 1:1). This must have been such a major earthquake that over two centuries later it was referred to by the prophet Zechariah, who said, 'You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah' (Zechariah 14:5). Archaeological excavations at Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, Jerusalem and elsewhere have uncovered fractured and tilted walls, a layer of broken artefacts and other

14 God not only saved humans but also animals from the Flood. Anecdotal reports from many places and times have associated unusual animal behaviour with earthquakes, as if the animals knew in advance what was about to happen. For instance, elephants were seen running away from the sea towards higher ground before the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, while a mass migration of thousands of frogs was reported shortly before the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China, and so on. Various theories have been advanced to account for these reports, such as animals having an ability to sense sounds or vibrations in the earth, or to be aware of the presence of subterranean gases released prior to earthquakes (<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/history-of-geology/can-animals-sense-earthquakes/>; http://thelivingmoon.com/45jack_files/03files/Tsunami_Can_Animals_Sense_Disasters.html; <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2004/12/how-did-animals-survive-the-tsunami.html>; <https://www.weirdasianews.com/2008/05/13/frog-migration-omen-to-china-earthquake-disaster/>; <https://sos.noaa.gov/education/phenomenon-based-learning/can-elephants-sense-tsunamis> <all accessed 30th December 2021>). We might add a further hypothesis – namely, that some animals (like Balaam's donkey in Numbers 22:21-35) have a spiritual sensitivity that human beings have lost on account of sin; if so, the animals may be more sensitive to the Holy Spirit's warnings than many of us are.

15 See David C. Lewis *After Atheism: Religion and Ethnicity in Russia and Central Asia* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press and New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000; New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p. 291.

evidence of a major earthquake dated to the middle of the eighth century BC with its epicentre in the north but the tremors also affecting the south of the region.¹⁶ Many of the predictions of disaster given by Amos refer to divine judgment through foreign invasion and deportation, but some of his predictions (e.g. Amos 6:11, 'the Lord... will smash the great house into pieces and the small house into bits') might also have referred to the earthquake two years later.

The other passage which came to my mind is Amos 6:13, which refers to those who 'rejoice in the conquest of Lo Debar and say, "Did we not take Karnaim by our own strength?"' At that time, Israel had succeeded in annexing a very small amount of extra territory, but the people were focussing on their political gain instead of the virtues of justice and righteousness. In the previous verse, Amos had accused the people of turning 'justice into poison' and 'the fruit of righteousness into bitterness'. It might be said that the people were seeking territorial expansion at the expense of seeking first the values of the Kingdom of God. Amos therefore prophesied that God would stir up a nation against them who would oppress them in the very territories which they had so recently acquired (Amos 6:14; cf. 2 Kings 14:25).

It seemed to me that the Armenians of today were very similar to the people of Israel at the time of the prophet Amos. Both were supposed to be 'the people of God' surrounded on most sides by hostile nations, but in fact

corruption was widespread in their midst. The devastation in Armenia was greatly exacerbated by corruption because the country had tight building regulations and enough engineers to enforce them, but those regulations had been ignored when some cement had been siphoned off for other purposes and the resulting concrete had an illegal ratio of sand to cement. Apartment blocks built of poor-quality bricks and flimsy concrete became death-traps, totally lacking the strength to withstand the tremors. Earlier buildings built during the Khrushchev era survived but many of those which collapsed had been constructed more recently, during a period of rampant corruption. If an earthquake of such a magnitude, measured at 6.9 on the Richter scale, had hit Tokyo or Los Angeles it would have caused much less loss of life because earthquake-resistant buildings would normally remain standing, despite being damaged: by contrast, in northern Armenia such a quake was sufficient to expose the corruption and its deadly consequences. It has been said that earthquakes do not normally kill people: it is falling buildings that kill people. The human element, in terms of types of buildings, significantly affects the degree to which earthquakes actually result in the loss of human life.

On the surface, the Armenians had a case for claiming Nagorno-Karabakh because over 80% of the population are ethnic Armenians. Nevertheless, Armenian claims to the province rest upon relatively weak historical foundations, because the last time this territory was actually under the jurisdiction of an Armenian state was in 65 B.C.! What is also clear, however, is that the conflicts - later escalating into warfare - were initiated by Armenian demands for Nagorno-Karabakh to be reassigned to Armenia.

The Azerbaijanis were also guilty of atrocities

16 See <https://biblereadingarchaeology.com/2018/02/05/earthquakes-in-the-bible/>; <https://www.livescience.com/biblical-earthquake-jerusalem-found.html>; <https://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/earthquake-bible-0015659> and <https://patternsofevidence.com/2019/01/20/biblical-quake-confirmed/> <all accessed 29th December 2021>. Further evidence of a major earthquake dated to the same period comes from deformed sediments near the Dead Sea. The extent of the structural damage to buildings and the wide area affected are indications that this was one of the most powerful earthquakes to occur in the region since the Bronze Age.

against Armenians - including the ripping out of unborn infants from pregnant Armenian women in Sumgait.¹⁷ Exactly the same kind of atrocities had been committed in the eighth century BC by Israel's eastern neighbours, the Ammonites (Amos 1:13): Amos prophesied that they would not go unpunished either, but he focussed his condemnations on the corruption and injustice among the people of Israel.

As I reflected on these and other parallels between modern Armenia and Israel at the time of Amos, I was faced with a dilemma: if God had indeed given me insights into some of the reasons why the earthquake had been allowed to occur, what was I supposed to do about it? Should I write to a supposedly atheistic government struggling to cope with the devastation of the earthquake and, as it were, to 'beat them over the head' with what would sound like a callous "I told you so" attitude? If God had indeed given me insights into the 'spiritual' reasons behind the earthquake, I needed to have these ideas checked out first by others, following the principle in 1 Corinthians 14:29, but none of those I approached gave me a clear opinion one way or the other.¹⁸ However, by April 1989 I felt I could wait no longer and that I had to send a copy of an article of mine entitled 'Armenia and Amos' to the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Etchmiadzin.¹⁹ The final part of this article stated that I believed God was calling the Armenians to repentance in two areas of their lives: firstly, to repent of

the corruption within their own society, and, secondly, to repent of their attitudes towards the Azerbaijani people, by putting into practice the teachings of Jesus about forgiveness, loving one's enemies and doing good to those who hate them.

This article was sent by registered post, accompanied by a letter explaining that these events are hard for anyone to understand but that I nevertheless felt I needed humbly to share with him the insights I believed God had given me. Similar letters were also sent to Armenian church leaders in Turkey, Lebanon, Europe and the USA - none of whom ever replied to me. I do not know what kind of reply I might have expected, but their silence did make me begin to wonder whether or not I had really heard from God. Then in October 1989 I attended a conference on Worship in Brighton, England, where one of the principal speakers was John Wimber - the American pastor whose ministry I had investigated while writing a book on healing miracles.²⁰ John started off by talking about a visit to him the previous December by a man named Paul Cain. When Paul had come to John with a message purporting to be from God, he had accurately predicted that on the day he arrived in California there would be a 'sign in the ground' confirming the message he had for John. At 3:38 a.m. that day there was indeed a 'shaking'-type of earthquake in California which left no casualties. Moreover, the timing was also significant, because some of what Paul Cain had to tell John Wimber was focussed around the

17 *Guardian* 9th March 1988; *Times* 12th March 1988. The reports stated that this was done by an Azerbaijani mob that entered the maternity wing of a hospital in Sumgait while searching for Armenians.

18 Over a year later, Bishop David Pytches confirmed to me that he thought my insights were indeed of God and apologised for not having conveyed that to me earlier.

19 The church is called 'Apostolic' because it is believed to originate from the preaching of the apostles Thaddaeus and Bartholomew in Transcaucasia; later, in 301AD, Armenia became the first country to adopt Christianity as its state religion.

20 David C. Lewis *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989). Some of the main findings are summarised in my chapter entitled *A Social Anthropologist's Analysis of Contemporary Healing* in J.I. Packer, Jeffrey Niehaus, Wayne Grudem, S.M. Burgess, David Lewis, John White and Others *The Kingdom and the Power* edited by Gary S. Greig and Kevin N. Springer (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1993), pp.321-343. An earlier report on another of John Wimber's conferences was published as an appendix to *Power Healing* by John Wimber with Kevin Springer (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

promise in Jeremiah 33:8.²¹ However, Wimber's account in Brighton then added a further detail, saying that Paul Cain had also mentioned that on the day after he left California "there would be a much more major earthquake elsewhere in the world which would be God's judgement on his people in that place." At the end of that session John confirmed to me that the earthquake in question was indeed the one in Armenia.²²

From this followed my subsequent involvements in Armenia which, among other things, included opportunities to share about these insights in churches, on television and in a newspaper interview. I also encouraged people to see the earthquake as an opportunity to make a fresh start and to turn away from the corruption which had brought so much suffering in their society. A much more difficult message to bring has been that of being willing to forgive one's enemies, because resentments and anger had become like a cancer in the hearts of the Armenian people.²³ In 1998, on a visit to Armenia to mark the tenth anniversary of the earthquake, I was not permitted to meet the President of Armenia himself but instead I was given the opportunity to meet with his press secretary and to present her with a Christian book entitled '*The Lost Art of Forgiveness*'.²⁴

21 Obviously, as there are only twenty-four hours in a day, the earthquake could not occur at "33:08"! Even though minor earthquakes do often occur in California, the accurate prediction of the exact day, coinciding with a significant time on that very day, is still highly remarkable.

22 The next issue of the magazine *Equipping the Saints* (Vol. 3, No. 4, Fall 1989), p.5., published by Wimber's organisation, Vineyard Ministries International, also confirmed this but the printed account did not include the comment spoken by John at Brighton about the earthquake being a form of judgement on God's people.

23 David C. Lewis *After Atheism*, op. cit., p. 292.

24 Johann Christoph Arnold *The Lost Art of Forgiving* (Robertsbridge: Plough Publishing, 2008). [I think this book had previously been published with the title *The Lost Art of Forgiveness* and that it was a book of that title that I gave to the press secretary for Robert Kocharian, the President of Armenia in 1998.]

EARTHQUAKES AS 'SIGNS'

My interest in the Armenian earthquake also helped me to understand more of what the Bible says about the significance of earthquakes. Of course, these principles can be derived from a study of the Bible itself, without coming to it through research into contemporary phenomena, but it seems to me that very often our perception of the Bible is conditioned to some extent by our own experience. We all know that events described in the Bible seem more 'real' or 'meaningful' to us if they relate in some way to our own circumstances of life: the truths have not changed but our perception of their relevance is often influenced by our own environment and experiences.

The whole question of suffering is a difficult one and has been discussed at great length by others, so I do not pretend to have all the answers. Nevertheless, to at least some extent this is an area in which contemporary experience can help to open our eyes to principles in the Bible that we might not have noticed before. For example, when I was in Armenia I was told that prior to the earthquake many people in the affected area had been warned in a dream or vision about the impending disaster.²⁵ One person, for example, said that she felt strongly that she had to get out of the city and go to visit relatives elsewhere. She had already left the city of Leninakan (nowadays renamed Gyumri) when the earthquake happened. Of course, we only know of the accounts of survivors but it raises the question of whether or not there were others who had been warned but who did not heed the warning or act on it. This is reminiscent of biblical examples cited earlier in which people like Noah or Lot were not only

25 David C. Lewis *After Atheism*, op. cit., p. 291.

warned of natural disasters but also acted on the warning.

In Armenia, some people who were not taken out of the experience of the disaster itself nevertheless believed that their lives were spared in miraculous ways. One woman, for example, was on the seventh floor of a building when it collapsed but she landed on the ground unhurt, afterwards saying that she felt as if “something or someone” had carried her down. A man on the ninth floor of a tall building sought God in prayer and felt that his prayers were answered because all the surrounding buildings collapsed but his did not.²⁶ This has parallels with some of the plagues of Egypt, when the land of Goshen, where the Israelites lived, was spared certain disasters that befell the rest of Egypt. However, we have to realise that this was only due to the grace and mercy of God: Jesus said that those who survived a disaster or who were not involved in it should not consider themselves to be better than those who perished (Luke 13:2-4). On the contrary, Jesus emphasised that all of us need to repent (Luke 13:5).

Repentance was indeed one effect of the Armenian earthquake. Whereas Leninakan had previously been a relatively prosperous city where the materialistic inhabitants had felt they had no need for God, after the earthquake there was a noticeable turning to Christ among the survivors. This was shown by the growth not only of Protestant churches but also of a more evangelical movement within the Apostolic Church.²⁷ It seems as if the shaking of the ground and the destruction of material property makes many people begin to re-examine their own values and to ask what is most important in life. In such circumstances there are those who realise that spiritual values, and a relationship

with God, are far more important. A close brush with death can also make people think seriously about what happens after death. In that process, there are those who realise that they need to repent and turn back to God.

From a geological point of view we can say that earthquakes are caused by stresses within the earth's crust and other factors. However, a secular geologist cannot answer the deeper questions which many of those affected by the earthquake may be asking, such as “Why has God allowed this to happen to me?”²⁸ Those ministering in such situations may be asked such questions but many Christians themselves do not know what to say. There is a danger of appearing overly critical or insensitive if we speak of the events as a judgement from God. On the other hand, it seems that relatively few Christians have thought much about the significance of earthquakes in the Bible or what God might be communicating through such events.

In the Bible at least two different types of earthquakes can be discerned. Several passages refer to relatively minor earthquakes in which there are no reports of casualties but the timing was extremely significant. Examples include the earthquakes which took place both at the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and also the one in Philippi when Paul and Silas were in prison (Matthew 27:51-54; 28:2; Acts 16:26). If these earthquakes had happened even a day earlier or later, their significance would have

28 Although I use the word ‘God’ in this example, in various cultural and religious contexts the question might be posed in different terms, involving ideas such as Fate, karma and so on. In Africa, it might be expressed in terms of witchcraft, as classically described by the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his book *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937). He describes how the Azande recognise that a house has fallen down because termites have eaten away its supports but the other, more pertinent question is ‘Why has my house been eaten by termites and not someone else’s house?’. The answer to that question is found in concepts of witchcraft.

26 David C. Lewis *After Atheism*, op. cit., p. 290.

27 David C. Lewis *After Atheism*, op. cit., p. 291.

been lost, but the fact that they occurred when they did was not lost on those who had eyes to see. It was not the magnitude of the earthquakes but their *timing* which imparted to them the significance of a sign from God.

A different kind of phenomenon appears to be the more major earthquakes which did cause suffering and death. A clear example is the judgement on Korah, Dathan and Abiram, along with their families (Numbers 16). Perhaps the earthquake mentioned in Revelation 11:13 could be another example. Although it states that seven thousand people died in it, it also says that the survivors 'were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.' It appears as if the earthquake probably led to repentance among a significant number of those who survived. If so, we can say that even those earthquakes which are forms of judgement also have a beneficial effect in terms of the spiritual lives of some of the survivors.

In taking the example of earthquakes, however, I do not want to make any claims that these are signs of the end-times. Although Jesus did say that 'there will be famines and earthquakes in various places' he added that 'all these are the beginning of birth-pains' (Matthew 24:7-8). Although Jesus mentioned earthquakes, among many other phenomena, as signs of the end of the age, he simply said that there would be 'earthquakes in various places' (Mark 13:8), without saying anything about their frequency or intensity. In a thorough review of available geological data, Steven A. Austin and Mark L. Strauss note that there has been a decrease in major earthquakes in the second half of the twentieth century as compared to the first half of the century.²⁹ I suggest that

the spiritual significance of many earthquakes lies not so much in their magnitude as in the *timing* of their occurrence in a particular context. The same could apply to other forms of 'natural disasters', including tsunami caused by earthquakes under the ocean.

WIDER PERSPECTIVES

To interpret a specific earthquake as a 'sign' from God depends primarily on insights gained by supernatural revelation. It was when I prayed and asked God specific questions about the Armenian earthquake that he began to show me the parallels between the Armenian situation and that of Israel at the time of Amos. However, there is a danger of jumping to conclusions because of interpreting a disaster through the lenses of one's own religious outlook and circumstances. Some Azerbaijani Muslims interpreted the Armenian earthquake as the judgement of Allah and used it as propaganda to promote Islam.³⁰ My own perspective agrees with these Muslims in seeing it as a form of divine judgement but my interpretation is different because I regard it as a case of judgement starting with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). Rather than 'taking sides' and saying one side is 'right' and the other is 'wrong', I see both sides as culpable and needing to repent or to seek God's mercy. In a similar way, Amos began by addressing the sins of some of Israel's neighbours, saying that they would be judged by God, but then the prophet focussed on the sins of Israel, and to some extent Judah – that is, those who claimed

29 Steven A. Austin and Mark L. Strauss *Earthquakes And The End Times: A Geological And Biblical Perspective* (http://www.icr.org/research/index/researchp_sa_r06/ <accessed 27th February 2011>).

30 An anonymous reviewer who read an earlier draft of this paper brought to my attention the way that Muslims also used the Krakatoa eruption for propaganda purposes in spreading Islam in Indonesia; this is mentioned by Richard Ellis at <https://freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/897682/posts> <accessed 28th December 2021>.

to be the people of God.

Even if an earthquake is a form of divine judgement for some, at the same time there are many accounts of divine mercy in the form of miraculous interventions. In other words, many different things are happening at the same time. The Armenian man whose building remained standing while those around fell down might be seen as a modern counterpart to the unusual circumstance whereby Rahab's house in Jericho apparently remained standing when the rest of the wall collapsed (Joshua 6:20-23). Similarly, in 2011 many drowned in the tsunami which hit the Tōhoku (Northeast) region of Japan but one man found himself being pulled out of the floodwaters by someone who appeared to be walking on the water: the Japanese man linked his miraculous rescue with the fact that he was wearing a cross at the time.³¹

In Armenia, some people realised after the earthquake that they had been warned of the disaster in advance through a dream or 'premonition' but they did not necessarily know how to act upon the information – or else they chose not to act. Likewise, during the plagues of Egypt, God through Moses predicted in advance what was going to happen: in at least one case even some of Pharaoh's officials acted on the warning so that they were able to save their livestock from the hail (Exodus 9:20-21), whereas those who did not heed the warning suffered the consequences. A modern parallel occurred in 2004, when a Christian in Myanmar had a dream about an imminent disaster: people in the church took this warning seriously and they prayed specifically for God's protection on their community. When the

Indian Ocean tsunami struck Myanmar, other places along the same stretch of coastline suffered damage but the town where the Christians were praying was unaffected.³²

After a disaster, people are initially more likely to turn to whatever religion is more familiar to them in their culture, not necessarily to Christianity. For instance, in the Shintō-Buddhist hybrid of 'Japanese religion' only about a quarter of the population regard themselves as having a 'religion' but this proportion doubled in Northeast Japan after the 2011 'triple disaster' of earthquake, tsunami and meltdowns at the Fukushima nuclear power plant.³³ On the surface this increased Japanese religiosity might appear to be a setback in terms of the spread of Christianity. However, an experienced missionary to Japan once commented to me that those who are more open to the spiritual dimension of life – even if it is in its Shintō or Buddhist forms – also tend to be more open to hearing the gospel of Jesus, as compared with those having a more secular outlook.³⁴ Anecdotally, I have heard reports that at least some survivors of certain earthquakes, including those at Wenchuan in 2008 and Haiti in 2010, seemed to be more open to the gospel – or at least asking spiritual questions. However, it is very difficult to measure 'spiritual receptivity' in an objective way because evaluations of 'receptivity' are based on local reactions to specific approaches by certain people using particular methods; others who develop relationships with local people in a different way might develop trust

31 David C. Lewis *Behind the façade: Unseen faces of Japan* in Riemsara Kuyakanon, Hildegard Diemberger and David Sneath (eds.) *Cosmopolitical Ecologies Across Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 124-142), p. 131.

32 Roman Dombrauskas, personal communication, reporting on a conference at which he had heard this testimony from the pastor of that church in Myanmar.

33 Horie, Norichika *Continuing Bonds in the Tōhoku Disaster Area: Locating the Destinations of Spirits* (*Journal of Religion in Japan* Vol. 5, Issue 2-3, pp. 199-226, 2016), p. 210.

34 Dr. Patrick McElligott, personal communication.

and friendships that might then lead to a totally different perception of local 'receptivity'. Therefore attempts to measure 'receptivity' to the gospel may be more like mirrors than lenses.

Sometimes the significance of an earthquake is only perceived by certain individuals – and it almost seems as if the earthquake occurred specifically for them. A biblical example might be the earthquake in Philippi, as a result of which the jailer and his family came to faith, especially after seeing how the prisoners had not taken the opportunity to escape (Acts 16:25-34). A Christian from one of the indigenous ethnic groups of southern Siberia told me of a time in the autumn of 2003 when she was on the point of abandoning her Christian faith. Just as she was about to return to her home village in the Kosh-Agach district of the Altai Republic and revert to shamanism, the road to her village was made impassable because of damage by an earthquake.³⁵ Nobody was physically injured by the tremors but the timing of the quake, and the way it damaged the road to her home village, was enough to convince my informant that God was speaking to her: "It was a sign," she said, "... that I should not become a servant of Satan". She re-committed herself to Jesus.

In this paper I have sought to highlight the fact that our research on events happening in the world around us, or our investigations into social or other trends, has to be complemented by an openness to God and asking the question 'What is God doing, or saying, through this?' In other words, our research has to be interpreted not only with the intellect but also spiritually, through a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. In seeking to apply these principles to

specific circumstances, asking whether or not contemporary natural disasters convey any deeper spiritual meanings, it is important to combine prayerfulness and listening to God with research into what is happening 'on the ground'. That is difficult to do, especially if one is caught up in relief work, but it is by asking appropriate questions that one begins to gain insights into unseen spiritual dynamics that might be operating in and through the visible circumstances.

There is also a place for counselling traumatised survivors. They, or their relatives and friends, at some time or other might be asking questions about whether the disaster was something caused by demonic powers or was a judgement from God. These are questions that can be raised not only by Christians but also by Muslims and those from other religious backgrounds – and even those who had hitherto considered themselves to be agnostics or atheists. Such questions are difficult to answer in any blanket fashion because they depend on discerning what God might be saying or doing in specific circumstances. I hope this paper might help to give pointers to some of the questions that counsellors could be asking: for example, it might be appropriate in some cases to ask people whether or not they felt they had received any kind of supernatural warning, perhaps through a dream, about what was going to happen.

The news media are unlikely to report on the spiritual effects of major disasters in terms of prompting people to re-evaluate their own lives and motives, or to ask questions about the purpose of life, and so on. The shaking of the material world may stimulate at least some people to seek after a 'kingdom that cannot be shaken' (Hebrews 12:28). While the media report on the material consequences and

35 Reports on this earthquake are available in Russian at https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Чуйское_землетрясение, <https://www.culture.ru/materials/31275/zhizn-v-epicentre> and <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/94665> <all accessed 30th December 2021>.

suffering, we as Christian researchers need to be asking deeper questions about the spiritual consequences in people's lives and about what God is doing in and through these events. In this way, our perspective needs to go beyond the visible events and trends in order to ask deeper questions, the answers to which are spiritually discerned.

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