

Trends in the 21st Century: Natural Disasters

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Modern trends and biblical patterns

Having only just stepped over the threshold into the twenty-first century, we all know that it is very difficult to predict what kinds of trends are likely to manifest themselves in the remaining 90% of the century. None of us know to what extent the lines on the graph that we can measure at the moment will continue on in the same direction or will take unexpected turns. All we can do is to say what is likely from our limited human perception.

For example, a century ago who could have predicted many of the changes that actually took place during the course of the twentieth century? Many of them, such as the development of aviation and of computers, were dependent on advances in technology which were either in their infancy or non-existent at the dawn of the twentieth century. If there had been a conference at that time on the theme ‘Trends in the Twentieth Century’, the papers would probably have been far off the mark!

God alone knows the future. However, he does occasionally give insights or warnings about what is going to happen. For example, in 1911 a Russian Orthodox monk is reported to have received a prophetic revelation outlining the course of history in the twentieth century (and perhaps beyond). The main points of the Russian monk's prophecy are worth quoting more fully because several of them were actually fulfilled during the twentieth century but some details still remain unfulfilled. He said: ‘An evil will shortly take Russia and wherever this evil comes, rivers of blood will flow.... It is not the Russian soul, but an imposition on the Russian soul. It is not an ideology, or a philosophy, but a spirit from hell. In the last days Germany will be divided in two. France will just be nothing. Italy will be judged by natural disasters. Britain will lose her empire and all her colonies and will come to almost total ruin but will be saved by praying women. America will be feed the world, but will finally collapse. Russia and China will destroy each other. Finally Russia will be free and from her believers will go forth and turn many from the nations to God.’¹

The source from which I obtained this quotation does not even mention the name of this Russian monk! He is like some other prophets mentioned in the Bible who were given accurate predictions about the future but whose names are not recorded.² What is more important in these instances is the content rather than the messenger.

These kinds of insights into the future do not come by ‘natural’ means but by supernatural revelation. As St. Paul put it, ‘The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned’ (1 Corinthians 2:14). As *Christian* researchers, what makes the difference between our research and that of secular researchers? Is it merely the subject matter? Is it that we try to observe high standards? No: secular researchers also do this. As *Christian* researchers, there is another dimension to our research – namely, the spiritual insights which God alone can give. There may be a deeper interpretation of the data that is not

obvious to outsiders but God alone can give these insights, as they are spiritually discerned. Therefore as we conduct our research we need to be open to the Holy Spirit and ask God what the data mean from His perspective.

This can even apply to such apparently ‘mundane’ tasks as the interpretation of statistics! For instance, some years ago I was conducting research on what happened at a Christian conference at which many people received prayer for healing. Out of 2,470 people who registered for the conference, 1,890 filled in a usable questionnaire for me about their experiences. Later, I followed up a random sample of 100 people through in-depth interviews: the questionnaire provided breadth, the interviews gave depth.³

When analysing the questionnaires, I discovered that greater degrees of healing were reported by younger than by older people – a difference which was statistically significant.⁴ From this arose the question of interpretation. One possible explanation was medical: younger bodies heal more rapidly. However, I also wondered what God was doing or saying through these statistics. It made me reconsider cases of miraculous healings in the Bible but unfortunately in most instances the age of the person healed is not reported. However, there is one category of healings for which some data is available – namely, cases of raising the dead. In the majority of cases of this reported in the Bible, the person raised to life is reported as being a child or a younger person. (Even Lazarus, whose age is not mentioned, might not have been too old if he had two unmarried sisters.) This is an observation which others have made simply on the basis of studying the Bible but my statistical data allowed me to extrapolate this more widely to other types of cases of miraculous healing today.

Then there is a further level of interpretation: what does this mean theologically? My provisional conclusion is that God still has a purpose on this earth for those whom He heals or brings back to life.⁵ If we are healed physically, we are nevertheless healed into bodies that are expected to deteriorate and die, whether from the same or other causes. By contrast, there was no link with age for cases of so-called ‘inner healing’, which often involved repentance and a new relationship with God which we expect to continue into eternity.

I do not want to imply that the Bible should be interpreted only through the lens of our contemporary experience: primarily the scriptures need to be understood in their own right and in the context of the original historical circumstances in which they were written. Moreover, God is a creative God who can do new things today which surprise us. Nevertheless, it seems as if at times the trends that we discover in today’s world can lead us into new insights into the eternal truths mentioned in the Bible.

Perhaps a much more controversial example of this concerns natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis and so on which occur nowadays. How should we interpret these in the light of the Bible? Put in another way, what is God doing or saying through such events?

This is an extremely complicated topic and I do not pretend to have all the answers. We all know that in a general way suffering is a result of sin but this is easier to see when the human cause is obvious, as in wars, theft, rape, deception or other kinds of

sinful behaviour. When the suffering is caused by natural disasters or so-called 'acts of God', the link with human sin is far less obvious.

The Armenian earthquake

A particularly sensitive 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 the 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* and *perestroika* 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 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.⁶ His 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). 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) 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 through corruption. As a result, 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. A relatively moderate earthquake (which in Tokyo or Los Angeles would have caused much less loss of life) was in Armenia 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 Armenians. However, Armenian claims to the province nevertheless 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 against Armenians - including the ripping out of unborn infants from pregnant Armenian women in Sumgait.⁷ In the eighth century BC exactly the same kind of atrocities had been committed by Israel's eastern neighbours: Amos prophesied that they would not go unpunished either, but he focussed his condemnations on the corruption and injustice among the people of Israel.

It is not necessary to detail a number of other parallels between modern Armenia and Israel at the time of Amos, but 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, but none of those I approached gave me a clear opinion one way or the other.⁸ 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. 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 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, where one of the principal speakers was John Wimber - the American pastor whose ministry I had investigated while writing my book on healing miracles. 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 3:38am 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 was focussed around the promise in Jeremiah 33:8.⁹ However, John Wimber then added a further detail, whereby 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.¹⁰

From this followed my subsequent involvements in Armenia which I do not need to detail here but, among other things, they included opportunities to share about these insights in an interview with a Christian newspaper, on a television interview and in churches. I have 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.¹¹ In 1998, on a visit to Armenia to mark the tenth anniversary of the earthquake, although I was unable to meet with the President of Armenia I was able to meet his press secretary and to present her with a Christian book entitled '*The Lost Art of Forgiveness*'.¹²

Implications for our understanding of the Bible.

In the same way as my research on healing led me to notice trends in the Bible, so also my interest in the Armenian earthquake 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 blinkered 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.

To some extent, we could even say that earthquakes are just one example of a wider category which are often referred to as 'natural disasters' - but which insurance companies actually call 'acts of God'! 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.¹³ 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 there were others who had been warned but who did not heed the warning or act on it.

This is reminiscent of biblical examples of people who were also warned of natural disasters and who also acted on the warning. Prior to the Flood, Noah and his family were warned of the disaster and they were saved because they did something about it. 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 casualties of the disaster (Genesis 19:14). During the plagues of Egypt, God through Moses predicted in advance what was going to happen and 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.

In Armenia, there were others who were not taken out of the experience of the disaster itself but their lives were spared, sometimes in what seemed to be 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.¹⁴ This too 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. As Jesus said, those who survived a disaster or who were not involved in it should not consider themselves to be better than those who perished.¹⁵ On the contrary, Jesus emphasised that all of us need to repent.¹⁶

This was indeed one effect of the Armenian earthquake, after which many became Christians.¹⁷ We could say that 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.

Concluding comments

In this paper I have sought to highlight the fact that our research on events happening in the world around us, or on 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 an openness to the Holy Spirit.

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'.¹⁸ This scripture does not say anything about the frequency or scale of such earthquakes.¹⁹

It seems to me that in the Bible there are at least two different types of earthquakes. Several examples involve 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.²⁰ If these earthquakes had happened even a day earlier or later, their significance would have been lost, but the fact that they occurred when they did was not lost on those who had eyes to see.

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, in Numbers chapter sixteen. 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 seems to me that 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.

The news media, however, are unlikely to report on the spiritual effects of major disasters in terms of their helping people to re-evaluate their own lives and motives, or asking questions about the purpose of life and so on. While the media report on the material consequences and 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 as Christian researchers needs to go beyond the visible events and trends in order to ask deeper questions, the answers to which are spiritually discerned.

¹ Quoted in Lance Lambert (1975) *Battle for Israel* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications), pp. 63-64.

² For example, 1 Kings chapter 13 describes an anonymous ‘man of God’ who accurately predicted the destruction of the altar at Bethel and even gave the name of the king (Josiah) who would do it. This was fulfilled about three centuries later (2 Kings 23:15-17). Even if the ‘man of God’ was actually Iddo the seer who had visions about king Jeroboam (1 Chronicles 9:29) – a suggestion advanced by the Jewish rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeroboam> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iddo> with a link to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashi> <all accessed 2nd. February 2011>) – the text in 2 Kings does not mention the name of the ‘man of God’. Other examples of anonymous prophets or ‘men of God’ with accurate predictive prophecies include those mentioned in 1 Samuel 2:27-36 and 1 Kings 20:13-14.

³ My results are published in my book *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989).

⁴ $p = 0.0002$

⁵ David C. Lewis *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact? op. cit.*, p. 65

⁶ David C. Lewis *After Atheism: Religion and Ethnicity in Russia and Central Asia* (Curzon Press, Richmond, UK and St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2000), p. 291

⁷ *Guardian* 9th March 1988; *Times* 12th March 1988

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.)

¹¹ David C. Lewis *After Atheism, op. cit.*, p. 292

¹² Johann Christoph Arnold *The Lost Art of Forgiving* (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.]

¹³ David C. Lewis *After Atheism, op. cit.*, p. 291

¹⁴ David C. Lewis *After Atheism, op. cit.*, p. 290

¹⁵ Luke 13:2-4

¹⁶ Luke 13:5

¹⁷ David C. Lewis *After Atheism, op. cit.*, p. 291

¹⁸ Matthew 24:7-8

¹⁹ With regard to the view that an increase in the frequency or intensity of earthquakes constitutes a sign that the Second Coming is imminent, I would like to draw attention to an article by Steven A. Austin and Mark L. Strauss entitled *Earthquakes And The End Times: A Geological And Biblical Perspective* (http://www.icr.org/research/index/researchp_sa_r06/ <accessed 27th February 2011>) which compiles data showing that there has been a *decrease* in earthquakes in the second half of the twentieth century as compared to the first half of the century. In any case, it seems to me that the significance of earthquakes lies not so much in their frequency or intensity as in the timing of their occurrence in a particular context. This is something which I felt was significant in the Armenian context but further research will be needed to see what the spiritual ramifications of other earthquakes have been.

²⁰ Matthew 27:51-54; 28:2; Acts 16:26