

"I gave you empty stomachs" Amos 4:6

1. The Prophets and Human Catastrophes

Despite the clear biblical evidence to the contrary, many people are reluctant to accept the idea of God acting in judgement. A great many more are reluctant to accept that judgement involves any notion of natural catastrophe, widespread disease, economic failure, war and the like.

The reason for this is that in our enlightened age we understand the nature of natural catastrophes much better than people once did. They are no longer fearful mysteries, but simply natural occurrences. They can even be to some extent controlled or kept at bay, and there seems to be no reason to find any sort of god lurking behind them. Thus the prevailing attitude to such events as foot and mouth disease or AIDS is to give them an entirely natural explanation. Even events over which we have absolutely no control, like a Tsunami, can be explained and, if not prevented, their damaging effects can at least be mitigated.

Thus, to think of God being involved in such events is to be obscurantist, and guilty of turning back the clock. The major problem of this "enlightened naturalism" is that, unfortunately, it stands in stark contrast to the witness of the prophets for whom the varied disasters of life were at times only too evidently a mark of the displeasure of God. Thus we are either driven to pursue our enlightened attitude further, and say that the prophets were creatures of their own age, merely reflecting ideas which we have now outgrown, or take the view that "*all scripture is profitable for doctrine*" and that the words the prophets enunciated have a timeless authority. If we opt for the latter, then we have to face the challenge of the prophets concerning the way we live, and what God is likely to do if we fall short of his demands. If we do not, we cease to live under the prophetic word. That has immense dangers.

What, then, exactly, did the prophets say?

2. The Verdict of Amos.

A key passage to start the enquiry is found in Amos 4:6-11. In this passage God reminds Israel of a series of disasters which he has already brought upon the nation, and he rebukes the people for failing to see the disasters as judgements and warnings, and for not repenting of their evil ways.

The first of these disasters is starkly described:-

"I gave you empty stomachs (lit. cleanness of teeth) in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

"Empty stomachs" obviously refers to a time of famine or food shortage; and two things are immediately apparent. First, God was responsible for the food shortage in whatever way it came! The text says simply, "I gave you empty stomachs", and the "I" is unmistakable. The shortage could not be dismissed as "one of those things that just happen"! Second, God expected the people to recognise why the drought had come and to respond by amending their ways and returning to him. He rebuked them for not responding, and, speaking through Amos, was sought to impress on them again why he had sent the drought.

Amos goes on to record a number of other "natural" disasters. He speaks of a failure of rain at a critical time for harvest (vv7-8), of blight and mildew in the gardens and vineyards (v9), of locusts devouring fig and olive trees, of plagues (v10), of the death of elite troops in battle (v10), and of an earthquake (v11). A number of lessons are all too apparent. First God was as responsible for all these events as he had been for the food shortage. There is a repetition of the first person pronoun "I" referring to God as each disaster is recalled. Second, they constitute a wide range of disasters. They involve the weather, crop diseases, insects, epidemics, defeat in war, even large scale natural disasters like earthquakes. Anything that brings about shortage and distress might well have been part of the list. Third, God expects each "judgement" to be recognised as a warning from him. Fourth, the patience of God is apparent in the way that he persistently brought so many different judgements over a period of time, none of them being totally destructive, but destructive enough to warn the people of the danger of their lifestyle. In other words the process of judgement was measured and had a remedial intent. However, as Amos elsewhere makes clear, where there was no adequate response there was no remedy and the cup of destruction was eventually filled up.

It is not difficult to see from this passage that Amos was aware of an ongoing "process" of judgement initiated by God on Israel. To him it was so clear. God was at work in every one of these happenings. It was all too much for his contemporaries, however, who bitterly, angrily and contemptuously rejected his words. To them he was not speaking from God. He was a traitor and misguided. He was ordered out of Israel by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (7:10-13), and there was an adamant refusal to heed the prophet's warnings.

3. The Verdict of other Prophets.

Although Amos provides a good point of departure, it would be possible to start from almost any of the prophetic writings and draw precisely the same conclusions. Perhaps the outstanding thing about the prophetic witness (which forms quite a large and very significant part of the Old Testament) is its total unanimity in making the link between natural disasters and the judgement of God. For example, **Hosea**, a contemporary of Amos, declares the following:-

*"Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites,
There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land.
There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery;
They break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.*

Because of this the land mourns (dries up), and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea are dying.” Hosea 4:1-3

It is evident from this “word of the LORD” that the sin in the land had been the cause of the land “drying up” with widespread loss of animals, birds and fish. It is all highly reminiscent of Elijah’s rebuke to Ahab many years before when Elijah called for a devastating drought on Israel which lasted three years, and which only came to an end with the destruction of the priests of Baal and a return to Jehovah.

Jeremiah faced drought in Judah a century and a half after Amos faced it in Israel. He described the devastating nature of it: *This is the word of the LORD to Jeremiah concerning the drought: “Judah mourns, her cities languish; they wail for the land, and a cry goes up from Jerusalem. The nobles send their servants for water; they go to the cisterns but find no water.” Jer. 14 1-4*

He recognises it as a judgement of God and immediately goes on to pray for relief. He knows perfectly well the connection between event and judgement. Jeremiah also notes the general lack of understanding about connecting these things:

They do not say to themselves, Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives autumn and spring rains in season, who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest. Your wrong doings have kept these away; your sins have deprived you of good.

A further example might be taken from **Haggai**, who spoke God’s word to Judah after the return from exile when once more they were forgetful of him:

“You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labour of your hands.” Haggai 1:9-11

The expression, “*What you brought home, I blew away*” is very graphic. It means that in one way or another, in a variety of “natural” causes and afflictions, God was acting in sovereign power and quite deliberately causing warning judgements in the shape of disappointing shortages.

The overall picture is plain. There is a consistent “word of the LORD” from numerous prophets in which the judgements of God are to be found in all sorts of calamities. One of the major prophets, **Ezekiel**, sums up the issue. Ezekiel, himself in exile, felt very bitterly and personally the meaning of God’s judgement. Moved by God he spoke of the coming destruction of Jerusalem in the following terms: “*For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgements--sword and famine and wild beasts and plague--to kill its men and their animals!*” (Ez. 14:21). It is worth noting that among this definitive description of God’s judgements should come “the plague”. Ezekiel had learned only too well the dreadful truth of God’s judgements are to be found both in natural and man-made disasters.

“I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the new wine, the oil ...”

4. The Prophets’ Words Reflect God’s Covenant with His People.

It is by no means the case that the concept of judgement by “natural” disaster was something peculiar to the prophets. It is to be found in the very covenant that God made with the Israelites in the wilderness. The blessings and curses written out in great detail in Deuteronomy 28 epitomised that covenant. Blessings were to follow obedience to God and curses were to follow disobedience. The curses meant that disobedience by the nation would spell out disaster. Deuteronomy makes it very plain that such disaster would be found in the field, among the animals, in drought, in locusts and other plagues, diseases (for both humans and animals), defeat in battle, rule by aliens, loss of children and possessions to invaders and, finally, captivity and deportation.

Thus the prophets in one sense were not receiving new revelation from God, but a quickening of old revelation. It had always been the case that judgement would come when the nation left God, and that such judgement would take many forms and include natural disasters.

5. Conclusion.

There are at least three very good reasons for accepting this unanimous message from the prophets. First is the fact that it survived and proved wrong the bitter criticism with which it was first received by its contemporary generation. It was rejected on the grounds that it was dubious theology. The prophets’ contemporaries took the view that God could not be speaking to them through natural catastrophe because, as everyone knew, God’s promises of blessing rested over the land. After all, the Israelites were the chosen people of God, Jerusalem was his chosen dwelling, the land was his gift. None of these blessings could be removed, and those who said that God had been warning, through droughts and the like, of his intention to do so, were simply out of step; the prophets, it was thought, must have a wrong theology. Such people were simply peddling doom and gloom, and were demoralising. Time was to show, of course, how bankrupt was this opposing theology, for history vindicated the prophets. As was the case then, the contemporary and accepted view is not necessarily right.

Second, as history vindicated the prophets, the Jews came to accept their writings as oracles of God. That was sensible. What the prophets said would happen, actually did happen, and they took the lesson to heart. When God vindicated his prophets, we also need to be careful not to reject their basic message of judgement, even if it does involve natural catastrophes. The fulfilled prophetic word is a very powerful argument, and was intended by God to be so.

Third, our generation needs to remember that, though we may be able to give a natural explanation to such events, there are always factors in those events that are beyond our knowledge. The size and timing of them can be notoriously unpredictable. Their disturbing feature is their unexpectedness. Given that God does judge, there is no good reason to think that he cannot judge through “natural events” which, despite all our science still remain very largely in his own hands. He is still the God of “Providence”, and a “hands on” God in his own world! If he moves through the “natural” events of our own personal lives, it is illogical to deny him any connection with other kinds of “natural” events.