brave boldness to make final decisions. It means purity, straightforwardness, candour and simplicity of character.\textsuperscript{30}

Thomas Merton on wisdom:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, \textit{Natura naturans}. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is the fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at one my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator’s Thought and Art within me, speaking as \textit{Hagia Sophia}, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.\textsuperscript{31}

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\textsuperscript{30} J Peper, \textit{The Four Cardinal Virtues} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 36


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\textit{‘And the Earth Shook’—Mortality and Ecological Diversity: Interpreting Jesus’ Death in Matthew’s Gospel}

Alan Cadwallader
Adelaide

1. The Bam earthquake and its interpretation

The world, or at least the Christian and commercial parts of it, was jolted from its Christmas relaxation and stupor by news of the Bam earthquake. Measuring 6.3 or 6.6 on Richter scale (depending on what report you read), it devastated ninety per cent of the city of Bam in south-west Iran early in the morning of 26 December 2003. Tens of thousands of people were killed. The response to the earthquake, at least as made it into digital or textual form, was quite diverse:

- Some concentrated on the sheer expanse of the devastation.
- There were rapid mobilisations of expressions of the need for sympathy and aid.
- Some focused on the destruction of ancient monuments, most especially the 2000-year-old largest mud-brick structure in the world that had been listed as a World Heritage Site.
- Specific organisations, like the \textit{Medecins Sans Frontieres}, framed their response in terms consistent with their principles. The \textit{World Zoroastrian Organisation}, for example, wrote of the immensity of the devastation: ‘It is but right and proper for us all to help and succour those sadly affected by this tragedy. We therefore appeal to you to be generous in the true tradition of Zoroastrians’. Compare the Christian organisations, \textit{ANM}, which flew the banner ‘Touching the Earthquake victims of Bam with the Love of Christ’ and listed among its prayer requests not only the rapid distribution of emergency items but also opportunities to ‘share the living Word of God with people who desperately need comfort’. Planet Ark news service contained a photo of an unstable building that had collapsed into a lean-to position against a
2. Natural phenomena and meaning-making

All these renditions reflect the effort to address, to come to terms with, to make meaning for, an event of massive proportions—at least according to a significant range of people. Scientific, humanitarian, religious and historical perspectives all became visible in the aftermath of the earthquake. Of course, the size of the response is in part due to the rapid transmission of information in today’s electronic age—and my selections are but a few from the array that hit the Internet within a few days. But no matter what cast is given to the earthquake, two elements stand out:

1. Immense natural phenomena when connected with human participants are subjected to equally immense efforts at the making of meaning.

2. For human beings, such natural phenomena are as much the construction of human reflection as events in themselves. There is no natural, or, dare I say supernatural, meaning for so-called natural phenomena. Feminist sociobiologists have long ago warned us against the naturalistic fallacy, where nature is assumed to carry or prove a given human interpretation.

Consequently, with the industry that is poured into the analysis and interpretation of such events, it is of little surprise to find that, when an event of human life is regarded by some as immense, a cross-pollination, as it were, may occur where immense natural phenomena are drawn, by human interpreters, into connection with the human event.

This certainly was the case in the ancient world. Even allowing that a response might be delayed a little by today’s standards, the Roman imperial courier system was extremely efficient, let alone the less formal networks in mercantile, military and migrant endeavours, in conveying news. Moreover, the size of response to such a phenomenon is no necessary indicator of its significance for particular groups of people—most especially those who witnessed or were directly affected by such an occurrence. The need to understand and interpret events is an ongoing human occupation, whether those events are focused on human activities or on natural phenomena.

3. Earthquakes and meaning-making in the ancient world

3.1 Making sense of earthquakes

Earthquakes in the ancient world brought out responses similar to those we have witnessed today. Earthquakes became, in some human textualisation, opportunities for humanitarian aid. The emperor, for example, would occasionally commemorate by the striking of coins or erection of monuments, his own imperial beneficence in providing for the restoration of a city which had been devastated by earthquake. Other political “wannabes” would also seek to enhance their power and influence through provision of aid, duly recorded of course. Pictorial representations would memorialise earthquakes—the known examples from the ancient world tend to concentrate on the devastation wreaked on large public buildings, as if this caught the
truck—though what that had to do with environmental concerns or awareness is anybody’s guess!

— There were emotionally detached reports offering geo-scientific reconstructions and photographs of the earthquake site, with such analysis as: the reading of the accelerogram, ‘as obtained from preliminary moment tensor solution of the event indicates a right-lateral strike-slip movement on a N-S trending fault rupture’.

— There were the sensational reports of miraculous survivals, such as that of the ninety-seven-year-old Sharbanou Mazandarani, who said that she felt that she was in a grave with only God as her partner; she spent her days reciting verses from the Qur’an.

— And there was even a trace of media self-reflection. Vit Pohanka of Radio Prague wrote, ‘I think first of all it made me think about how powerful nature can be, and how often we think of our little problems in various ways and we forget that there can be such a thing as a disaster of this size. We’ve got science, we’ve got everything and yet this is something that cannot be predicted and can happen again. A few years ago we had a disaster here in Prague, the floods. And of course it was a disaster, a terrible disaster. But if you take that around thirty people died during two weeks of flooding, and in Bam at least 30,000 people died in just a few seconds, then it gives you a certain perspective.’

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¹ A simple Google search on the World Wide Web yielded the results.
meaning of the earthquake. And there were written reflections upon earthquakes to aid the processes of interpretation, frequently tying the earthquake to political or moral-religious meaning. The Sibylline Oracles, especially those written under Jewish and Christian influence in the second and third century CE, used earthquakes almost as a refrain of judgment on the Roman empire or individual cities that appear to have run shy of desired performance.

Such textualisation could also occur at a more popular level; one of the pieces of graffiti etched into plaster at Pompeii, the coastal Italian resort devastated by volcanic eruption in 79 CE, was ‘Sodom and Gomorrah,’ though whether the graffiti pre- or post-dated the destruction is still debated. Inevitably, God or the gods were linked with earthquakes, although the second-century Roman writer, Aulus Gellius, wryly observed that ‘it has not been discovered to what god sacrifice should be made on the occasion of an earthquake’ (Attic Nights 2.28.1). One of the epithets of Zeus, especially in Asia Minor, was Zeus Gaiochos/Seisichthon, Zeus the land-breaker, Zeus the earth-shaker, and this was frequently reiterated in images on coins.

3.2 Making sense with earthquakes

Alternatively, earthquakes and other natural phenomena, read through the lens of volumes of somewhat variegated human response, were frequently drawn into connection with significant human events, whether or not they actually occurred at the same time. Ancient historical writers, Herodotus for example, happily collate human events regarded as significant with natural phenomena—military or naval battles, the collapse of government, the birth or death of a famous man (and I think a gendered exclusivity is accurate here and witnesses to the limited human perspective involved in any human construction). It does not matter that the actual occurrence of an earthquake might be removed in time and space from the human event interpreted as significant, indeed made an occurrence made, into an ‘event’, by interpretation. For example, Julius Caesar’s death comet is actually given different time placements. Plutarch recorded that the comet flared for seven days after Caesar’s death (Lives: Caesar 69.3-5); for Suetonius, ever conscious of the need to justify political realities, it did flare for the same time-frame, but during the games organised by Caesar’s successor, Augustus (Lives of the Caesars: Julius Caesar 1.88). The imperial order, not merely the celebration of a great man, was vindicated as in accord with nature, by the hand of an interpretative writer. Mind you, if you read Virgil’s extravaganza on Caesar’s death, the previous two eulogists were way too limited—comets (cometae plural) might appear, but earth shatterings, ghostly appearances and darkened sun dominate (Georgics 1.466-488). Significantly however, Virgil’s volcanic eruption is yet another example of ‘temporal and spatial collapse/folding’, as no disturbance for Etna is recorded for 44 BCE. Such ‘collapse’ is equally at home in Jewish writings.

It does not matter that the earthquake or other natural phenomena might not have occurred at all. The great second-century Syrian satirist, Lucian of Samosata, scathingly noted that if you wanted to make a man famous at his death then provide an earthquake and a vulture flying off to the sun, and add some dramatic cry (On the Death of Peregrine 39). A conjunction is forged in the act of human interpretation between human activity and other natural activity; it is a symbiotic relationship where each is mutually dependent on the other for meaning. Once we recognise that the connection is a human activity, a human reflection, then we can begin the work of exploring the limitations and the potential of the work and responsibility of human interpretation, especially the interpretation of the natural world.

4. Phenomena associated with Jesus’ death

Earthquakes frequent two writings of the Christian Testament—the book of Revelation, where earthquakes are part of the literary stock-in-trade of the apocalyptic genre, and the Gospel of Matthew. In

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3. So Herodotus moves a known eclipse through time and space to coincide with Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont—see WD Davies and DC Allison A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), vol 3, 623 n65.
4. The meaning of comets is by no means singular; see Manilius The Heavens 1.829ff.
Matthew, an earthquake rises suddenly into the picture of Jesus' death. If Mark is the first gospel to be written, the only strange phenomenon connected with Jesus' death would be the rending of the temple veil (Mark 15:38; Matt 27:51). (The 'darkness at noon' is an accompaniment for Jesus' last three hours rather than a response to his death: Mark 15:33-34; Matt 27:45-46.)\(^7\) Mark eschews or knows nothing of either earthquake or the splitting of rocks or, for that matter, any of the other strange phenomena that Matthew provides.

And provide Matthew does. If there had been an actual earthquake coincident with Jesus' death that was capable of rending the temple veil, no doubt there would have been more substantial damage and more substantial corroborative textual evidence. The former appears to have been a concern of some early Christian writers, for they not only repeat the temple veil incident but add that a massive temple lintel fell and broke (Gospel of Hebrews apud Jerome's letter to Hedioie, Ep. 120:8; cf 2 Baruch 6:7-9). Indeed, the embellishments often supplied further explanations for these events, striving to heighten a supernatural perspective on the criminal's execution. The Gospel of Peter explained the earthquake as caused by the nails extracted from Jesus' hands being dropped on the ground after Jesus was taken from the cross (G Pet 21). Tertullian, in typical anti-Jewish mode, explained the rending of the veil by the violent departure of the angel of the temple deserting the Daughter of Zion—the dispensation of the Jews had ended; the age of the Gentiles of the Lord had begun (Adv Marcion 4.42.5 CC 1.660).

5. Self-interested interpretation of the rending of the veil

In effect, Tertullian's flamboyant defence of a faith that had become subject to a Gentile rather than Jewish understanding has dominated the interpretation of the rending of the veil. It gathered new life with the Protestant break with Rome, where the emphasis on free and open access to grace was imposed as the reading on the veil incident. In a deft intertextual reference to the letter to the Hebrews (e.g, Heb 10:19-20), the veil tearing became a reference to opening up the most sacred place to all, as against the high priest (read: Pope) and priests (read: Catholic cardinals, bishops and parish priests) and indeed the whole Temple establishment (read: Catholic Church). In recent times,

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With the death of Jesus, God’s presence is not confined to the holy of holies but has been made present in the crucified body of Jesus and in the community gathered in his name. . . . The tearing of the veil is indeed an ‘opening’, providing new access to God, but for the Temple itself such an ‘opening’ is a sign of condemnation.

He is far from alone.

Effectively, this either isolates the rending of the temple veil from the earthquake or subsumes the earthquake, and indeed the rock splitting, to this interpretation. The temple and its accoutrements are repudiated, Jesus is vindicated and Gentiles now have unrestricted access to God. The notion that Matthew has written a gospel for a predominantly Jewish community living in exile mourning the loss of their holy sanctuary seems insufficient to disturb this explanation. The observation that Matthew was dissatisfied with Mark’s singular concentration on the tradition of the rending of the veil makes no adjustment to the rendition. The recognition that the same Greek word is used to designate the rending of the rocks as the rending of the veil (schizo) does not trouble the interpretation with a kindred suggestion that God has repudiated the geological substructure of the earth! Not only does such an interpretation foster a racist and religious exclusivity, it is totally anthropocentric, the antithesis of an earth-sensitive reading.

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the natural order, it is determined by human self-interest and self-concern.

6. The importance of the shaking of the earth

However, if we allow the shaking of the earth greater significance, at least honouring Matthew’s inclusion of it conjointed to the Markan foundation, then a different possibility emerges. The shaking of the earth—its shock and commotion—is placed as the central item in a threefold layering of phenomena that Matthew connects with Jesus’ death, although modern punctuation (such as in the NRSV) distracts from its visibility:

At that moment,

i) the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom,

ii) the earth shook,

iii) and the rocks were split.

Matthew then expands on the last element with ‘The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised’ (Matt 27:51–52).

7. The three-tiered universe at Jesus’ death

Suddenly in view is the ancient cosmology of a three-tiered universe, given that the temple was understood, especially in the holy place, as the gateway of heaven. In fact, the veil, whether understood as the veil to the holy place or the smaller inner veil to the holy of holies, was fabricated to symbolise heaven. Josephus, the Jewish general-become-historian-apologist wrote that a Babylonian curtain, embroidered with blue, scarlet and purple linen thread and hung before the main entrance of the sanctuary at the back of the vestibule and ‘worked into the tapestry was the whole vista of the heavens’ (Jewish War 5.212–14). This veil hung as a garment of heaven. Thus, another way of viewing the rending of the temple veil may be possible, one which indicates that God is not mute in the distance, but close at hand, agonising over the death of the righteous one. The rending of the heavens, symbolised in the designs on the curtain (Exod 26:1—cherubim), the rending of the earth’s rocks, with the unlocking of the graves, join with the earthquake to indicate that the three ordered tiers of the entire cosmos (heaven, earth and under the earth) are shaken at what has transpired.

The high priest may tear his garments (against the requirements of the law—see Lev 21:10) as a mark of effrontery at Jesus’ words (Matt 26:65). The ripping of God’s heavenly garment at the locus of God’s presence expresses a similar extreme emotional response, but this time at the death of the child. The agony on the cross reverberates in the temple and into heaven. God was not insensitive to the plight of Jesus. God is not immune from the agony of the cross. Neither is God indifferent to the members of Matthew’s community of faith. God joins earth in the agony.

The significance and meaning of Jesus’ death are constructed by Matthew in connection with the scientific worldview of the day: three-tiered universe. Rather than viewing the events surrounding Jesus’ death as an eschatological promise or initiation for the benefit of human beings alone, these events become the total cosmic setting that determines the significance and understanding of Jesus’ death. Mortality is rendered not a human preoccupation but a cosmological event that, significantly, has earth as its centre. Only in connection with the heavens, the earth and the deep does, indeed can, death have any meaning. The anthropocentric preoccupation with escaping death by withdrawal from the cosmos into another place is denied by Matthew.

8. The three-tiered universe at Jesus’ resurrection

The triple connection is underscored at the resurrection, which in Matthew is heralded by another earthquake. The sepulchre, the earth and the angel of the Lord (Matt 28:1–2) conjoin the familiar three-fold universe with new life, a suggestion already signalled at Jesus’ death, where the veil between death and life was also rent (Matt 27:52). Again for Matthew, there can be no understanding of new life without connection with the total cosmic setting. The centrality of the earth is again emphasised, an emphasis corroborated by the absence of any

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10. The question of the origins of Matthew’s additional material is addressed at length by Brown 1138–1140 and, differently, by Waters 504.

11. There is a faint recognition of this possibility in Brown 1120 but its significance is lost under his suggestion of romanticism.

12. Note the emphasis on ‘from top to bottom’, i.e. not with human hands.

13. For the contemporary adherence to the three-tiered universe, see the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs (Simeon) 3:9.

14. And this even in the apocalyptic scenario delivered in chapter 24—note the emphasis on ‘birth’ in 24:8.
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14. And this even in the apocalyptic scenario delivered in chapter 24—note the emphasis on ‘birth’ in 24:8.
ascension in Matthew. The focus is the earth which, in company with
heaven, gives its authority (Matt 28:18) to one whose death and life has
been given to it, albeit not without a struggle (Matt 26:38). Human
death and life have become reunified with their creation context.

9. Mortality and the natural order

There is no question that the association of the natural world with
Jesus’ death is a construction of the evangelist. It indicates Matthew’s
effort to bring meaning to a human event, to make death significant.
Matthew had a number of concerns and traditions informing that
effort: a floundering community of faith, a Roman imperial counter-
story of the death of Jesus of Nazareth as a criminal, written
interpretations of natural phenomena, a cosmology that had a long
hold on the Jewish, and sometimes non-Jewish, mind. These were
important to Matthew at the time, even though we would recognise
the limitations of any of these elements for an ‘ecological reading’
today. However, the potential of Matthew’s interpretation of Jesus’
death for us today lies in

i) the search to understand mortality and new life in the context
   of the whole natural order and its processes

ii) attending to natural phenomena especially for their
    interconnection rather than their isolation

iii) the effort to interpret natural phenomena in connection with
    rather than in subservience to human life

iv) the responsibility to bring that understanding to others—a
    mission context if you want an ecclesial formulation for it.

This potential will be realised if there is an embrace of the
contemporary concerns of communities of faith, political realities,
scientific worldviews and phenomenological observation. It will
remain unfulfilled if older concerns and traditions are dogmatically
held or revived as the meaning-making of the present and future.

Design, Diversity and Dominion:
Biodiversity and Job 39

Norman Habel
Adelaide

1. Introduction

Biodiversity has become a buzz-word in recent years. With the tempo
of extinction increasing, we have become aware of the remarkable
interdependency of all life forms on our planet. The frightening force
of this awareness has really only become apparent as humans realise
that by destroying their living habitat they will in the end become their
own victims.

Not only will we be creating a soulless place, devoid of
birdsong with ever expanding vistas of plastic and
concrete, but the biodiversity we need to protect our
bodies and sustain our spirits is the one thing we can
never replace.¹

Biodiversity, however, is more than a concern for healthy human
habitats. A healthy planet also involves what Wendell Berry calls ‘the
survival of a diversity of wild creatures’.

We know too that we cannot imagine ourselves apart from those
necessary survivals of our own wilderness that we call our instincts.
And we know that we cannot have a healthy agriculture apart from the
teeming wilderness in the topsoil in which worms, bacteria and other
wild creatures are carrying on the fundamental work of
decomposition, humus making, water storage and drainage. ‘In
wildness is the preservation of the world’ as Thoreau said, may be a
spiritual truth but it is also a practical fact.²

   288 (March 1997:9).
². Wendell Berry, Getting Along with Nature (North Point: North Point Press, 1987),
   11.