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“THE LORD WAS NOT IN THE EARTHQUAKE...” : REFLECTIONS ON HAITI

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The terrible earthquake that struck Haiti on 12th January focussed the world's attention and concern on a country that doesn't usually feature very prominently in global affairs. Most people knew little or nothing about Haiti or even where it is. They do now. For a few days, at least, it was the top story in newspapers and on news bulletins around the world. And one thing that the world learned was that few countries are less equipped to deal with such a disaster than Haiti. And Haiti gets more than its fair share of natural disasters, being in the path of the hurricanes that all-too-regularly sweep through the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico.

Haiti is almost inconceivably poor. The population long ago outstripped the country's capacity to support it, and the principal ambition and necessity of many Haitians is to leave – preferably for the United States. Haiti's natural environment has been devastated by the almost total deforestation of what must once have been a lush, green tropical paradise. The resultant soil erosion has left Haitians trying to scratch a living from land as impoverished as they are. And because this became an increasingly futile exercise, many Haitians abandoned the countryside to see if they could make some sort of a living in the towns – which means, principally, the capital city, Port-au-Prince. The shanty towns they built around the city had no chance when the earthquake struck.

There are some places in the world where earthquakes are just as likely to occur as are in Haiti, but which have used new building methods and imposed stricter regulations in order to minimise the impact of the shocks. Haiti, though, like many other poor countries in earthquake zones, lacks the resources to avail itself of these architectural innovations. And like so many cities around the world, Port-au-Prince is grossly overcrowded. Its buildings are – or were, before the earthquake destroyed them – dilapidated, badly maintained, and poorly, even dangerously, constructed. The city lacks the physical and administrative infrastructure that we take for granted, so when disaster strikes there is little money or capability to deal with it. That's why Haiti had no choice but to turn to the world for help. And hearteningly, the world has responded, with aid, rescue teams and promises of help coming in from a bewildering array of countries.

Sadly, though, Haiti's long-standing and endemic problems mean that pouring in aid will not be enough. In a country beset for generations by corruption, crime and violence, and without an effective government and political system, there is no real foundation on which reconstruction can begin - unless, of course, the very devastation can give birth to something new, something infinitely better than what went before. Disaster can sometimes be a catalyst for necessary change. But as to whether it will in Haiti depends on how long the world retains its interest once the news media have moved on. And it will also depend on the ability and the willingness of Haitians themselves to take control of their own destiny as a nation.

There is a tragic irony in Haiti's lamentable condition – even before the earthquake – as a 'failed state'. Once, in the late 18th century, it became a beacon of hope for the enslaved and for the 'friends of liberty' around the world. Like other Caribbean territories, Haiti had witnessed first the extermination of its native peoples by European invaders (in Haiti's case, the French), and then their replacement by slaves brought from Africa on the notorious 'middle passage'. But Haiti then witnessed something unique: a successful slave uprising and the establishment of an independent state in the western sector of the island of Hispaniola.

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The uprising was led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, whose achievements and subsequent death in a French prison were commemorated in a sonnet by William Wordsworth and a longer poem by John Greenleaf Whittier. Both saw in him an inspiration for all who struggled against slavery, be it of the body, mind or soul. Wordsworth wrote of Haiti's national hero:

*There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee: thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exaltations, agonies,
And love, and Man's unconquerable mind.*

(From, 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture', 1802)

John Greenleaf Whittier, writing thirty-five years later, as the Abolitionist struggle in America built towards its bloody climax in the Civil War, said of Toussaint L'Ouverture:

*Dark Haytien! for the time shall come,
Yea, even now is nigh.
When everywhere, thy name shall be
Redeemed from color's infamy;
And men shall learn to speak of thee
As one of earth's great spirits, born
In servitude and nursed in scorn,
Casting aside the weary weight
And fetters of its low estate
In that strong majesty of soul
Which knows no color, tongue or clime.*

(From, 'Toussaint L'Ouverture', 1837)

Toussaint, who also inspired Harriet Martineau's novel, 'The Hour and the Man', was thus a hero and a martyr for religious and political liberals during the course of the 19th century. A great deal of sentimental mythology grew up around him and yet, apparently, the brief period during which he governed Haiti – 1797 to 1801 – was, 'happy, tranquil, and prosperous' ('The Poetry of Slavery', ed. Marcus Wood, OUP, 2003, p. 504). All this ended, though, when he was betrayed by Napoleon and died a prisoner in France. Haiti was never to fulfil the high hopes of Toussaint and his admirers, all too often falling under the control of brutal dictators and their thuggish henchmen. So briefly an inspiration, Haiti all-too-soon subsided into a byword for tyranny, superstition and poverty.

Today, we see the suffering of Haitians as resulting from a combination of natural and human factors. We don't see it as the handiwork of a wrathful God punishing the Haitians for their sins, real or supposed. And yet, for many centuries, before we learned geology and became familiar with the inexorable and utterly impersonal grinding together of Earth's tectonic plates, the power of earthquakes seemed explicable only in terms of the supernatural.

Earthquakes are often mentioned in the Bible as illustrations of God's power, but usually in somewhat general terms. But a specific, historical earthquake is mentioned in the book of Amos. We read that Amos received his 'visions...two years before the earthquake' (1: 1). Amos saw this earthquake, which occurred in the 8th century BC, as a judgement on injustice and oppression:

Listen to this, you that grind the poor and suppress the humble in the land... (8: 4)

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It was the result of corruption and misrule by the rich and powerful who, presumably, had the most to lose when disaster struck. Amos describes what is, clearly, a real earthquake:

*Will not the earth quake on account of this?
Will not all who live on it mourn?
The whole earth will surge and seethe like the Nile
and subside like the river of Egypt.*

(Amos 8: 8)

But from catastrophe – ‘So many corpses, flung out everywhere’ (8: 3) – something new will emerge. First, God will,

*...shake Israel among the nations,
as a sieve is shaken to and fro...*

(Amos 9: 9)

But a remnant will remain, and a new hope:

*On that day I shall restore David's fallen house;
I shall repair its gaping walls and restore its ruins.*

(Amos 9: 11)

Now, we may not see earthquakes in quite the same way as Amos did nearly three thousand years ago, but the words of his prophecy don't seem entirely inappropriate to what has happened in Haiti.

By the 19th century, though, the new science of geology was transforming our understanding of the planet, including those cataclysmic events that were once attributed to direct divine intervention. Among those who were changing perceptions was Charles Darwin, whose scientific interests included geology. On his round-the-world voyage on HMS Beagle, he had first-hand experience of a massive earthquake – estimated to have been 8.5 on the Richter scale – and its consequent tsunami. These devastated the Chilean city of Concepcion and a wide surrounding area in February 1835. Darwin wrote a detailed description of what he witnessed. It is reminiscent of accounts of more recent disasters such as those in Haiti, Indonesia and elsewhere. And as he also wrote in a letter to his old Cambridge professor, John Stevens Henslow,

I wish some of the Geologists who think the Earthquakes of these times are trifling could see the way the solid rock is shivered. In the town there is not one house habitable.

(‘Charles Darwin: The Beagle Letters’, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, CUP, 2008, p. 328)

For Darwin, profoundly awed though he was by the earthquake and its consequences, the event was wholly natural and a subject of excited and enthusiastic scientific interest. Nevertheless, he was also moved by the human suffering it caused:

As shock succeeded shock...no one dared approach the shattered ruins; and no one knew whether his dearest friends and relations might not be perishing from want of help. The thatched roofs fell over the fires, and flames burst forth in all parts...and few had the means of providing food for the day. Can a more miserable and fearful scene be imagined?

(‘Voyage of the Beagle’ (1839), Penguin, 1989, p. 232)

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To bring the point home to his British readers, Darwin described what he thought such an earthquake would mean here, painting a picture of carnage, chaos and the utter ruin of the country. It is heartening to read, however, that in Concepcion, the British consul, Mr. Rous,

and a large party whom he kindly took under his protection, lived for the first week in a garden beneath some apple-trees.

(Ibid. p. 233)

Darwin doesn't speculate on, 'Where was God in all this?' And to do so is to miss the point anyway. To go back to the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah experienced an earthquake on Mount Horeb that, 'broke the rocks in pieces'. But, we are told, 'God was not in the earthquake.' Rather, God came to him as, 'a still small voice' (I Kings 19: 11-12).

And in the face of an earthquake today, God comes to us as, 'a still small voice', urging us to respond with human compassion and generosity to those who suffer.
