

A Traditional look at Armageddon!

Written by Natnael Yebio W.

What does the earth need to start quaking, for the elements to unleash their wrath? According to tradition, the main ingredient that activates the doomsday machine is our sin which comes in many shapes, sizes and colors.

Girls wearing miniskirts or baring their navels, boys plaiting the hair, youngsters eating without saying grace and ridiculing the elderly, women working out while husbands stay at home to do the dishes, brides laughing and giggling on their way to the church, the government asking the elderly and honorable men and women to learn the alphabets (in a badly organized illiteracy campaign project), and last but not least, the leader of a country giving orders to search villagers for a possible cache of food somewhere under their beds, etc. All these were and still are, in our tradition, considered signs and omens capable of unleashing divine wrath unless put back to normal on time.

Many lakes have already evaporated, many animals have become extinct, and deserts are invading arable lands because of our sins.

It would however need more than a priest, a theologian or a scientist to explain the 'electromagnetic' or 'metaphysical' relationship between human iniquities and natural disasters.

However, our traditional thinking doesn't need to go that far. It is simply put this way: people tread the wrong path and follow the dictates of their baser appetites, and the gods visit them with all kinds of calamities with a view to cleansing the earth from their defilements.

I once read a statement made by an Ayatollah to the effect that earthquakes happen simply because of man's wickedness. When they told him that earthquakes are rarely heard of in the West while Iran has them all the time, he replied by saying that much terrible earthquake is being prepared for them in the future. Which means that they are so wicked that the gods are taking further time and energy to design and perfect a special earthquake tailored just for them.

In our tradition, all calamities have spiritual interpretation. Even wars are considered by some to be divine wraths, visitations from above, to be listed along with earthquakes, pestilence, famine, locusts, hailstorm, floods etc. These are to be warded off by special prayers and the collective

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invocation of the divinity.

In this, the difference between natural and man-made disasters fades away and thus all disasters, whether geological, social, economic or political, are all natural disasters, for according to our traditional belief man has no power, whatsoever, to bring disaster upon the earth unless God wanted it in the first place.

Thus, we have special prayers to ward off evil, and rituals to protect or save us from all types of disasters, and readymade sayings and maxims to explain the unexplainable.

In the 50s, commercial jet travel has just begun, the sky used to be cleft asunder by a white streak of smoke which seemed to like a pencil drawing a line in the heavens, moved by an invisible hand. But the invisible hand was, as many were to learn later, a simple jetliner (leaving behind condensed fumes from its engine) on its way to the next airport.

However, some women who, after witnessing the 'sign in the sky', went post haste to pray at a vast church compound hugging and kissing each other in a frenzied show of indiscriminate mutual forgiveness and gushing forth of sentimentalism and piety. They thought it was the end of the world. They were, in other words, saying their last words of love and compassion before they kissed mother earth goodbye.

Also there is the time, the rains simply forgot to come during the official rainy season. It was in the middle of July (hamle) and it should have rained round-the-clock. But it didn't. So as usual off marched the folks to the mosque and church compounds to repent and ask for the belated life-giving rain. One week later the answer arrived in the form of violent downpour and torrents and floods that devastated orchards and plantations. "They prayed too much!" commented some smart aleck.

But why is the Almighty punishing us all the time? Are we chosen to get the stick as if it were our preordained lot? You asked the ancient. The ready-made answer was invariably: because God loves us and wants to cleanse us from our sins.

When people lived in caves in blissful ignorance millions of years ago, and when sin was not invented yet, the earth was still quaking as dictated by the law of nature, and the elemental soup above brewed and kept hurling thunderbolts and gushed forth with all types of storms that

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scared the hell out of our hominid ancestors and our mammalian friends.

What did these people think in those times? They thought they had by mistake embarked on the wrong boat, and had to accept things with total resignation as they unfurled themselves before their eyes. But little by little, they began to control their environments and their emotions and learned to foresee disasters and anticipate calamities.

The 2004 Tsunami devastation in the Indian Ocean had left many people pensive and apprehensive. There is a force beyond human control that can snuff out millions of lives in seconds, and nobody knows when and where it will again show up its ugly face.

The good news, however, is that we are, as our scientific and technological knowledge advances, ready more than ever to challenge nature even if at times it sneaks up on us unawares and from time to time manages to outsmart us.

In this unpredictable world of ours, calamities (in all their forms, geographical, economical or political) will always follow us wherever we are. Our task is therefore to accept them as solvable problems and fight them with all that is available to us to bring them to naught or put them under our control!