

# BUT GOD WAS NOT IN THE EARTHQUAKE: Theodicy in biblical and contemporary religious responses to natural disasters

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## THE THEODICY OF NATURAL DISASTERS-

I examine the disparities between the sophisticated responses to God's role in natural disasters in antiquity and contemporary theists' abdication from the issue. I argue that the reason for this contrast—between the richness of theological responses to disaster in antiquity and the weakness of the theological reflection among moderns—has largely to do with the introduction in modernity of a narrowed view of God's justice through Leibniz's definition of theodicy, itself a product of the scientific worldview.

*“Theodicy attempts to understand the existence of human suffering with the belief in a God who is both all-good and all-powerful.”*

## METHODOLOGY-

1. Analyzed passages from early Jewish and Christian texts with reference to earthquakes
2. Found 3 patterns: divine control, natural, divine inspired
3. Analyzed texts from 4 contemporary American Jewish and Christian religious groups on recent disaster response
4. Traced the contrast between the ancient and contemporary responses given the moderns' acceptance of the Leibnizian concept of God and theodicy

### Additional Resources:

For information regarding natural hazards and religion see work by David Chester, for example Chester, D.K. “The Theodicy of Natural Disasters.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998): 485-505.  
For a contemporary perspective on the theodicy of natural disasters by a theologian see Kazen, Thomas. “Standing Helpless at the Roar and Surging of the Sea.” *Studia Theologica* 60 (2006): 21-41.  
Also, Hart, David Bentley, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 100.

## ANCIENT EVIDENCE-

**Divinely Caused Earthquake:** The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic text from the New Testament, written in the 1st century C.E. In one passage, God causes an earthquake as one of the many symbols of divine power and dominance.

*“And there were flashes of lightning, voices, and peals of thunders, and there occurred a great earthquake such as had never been since there were people on earth, so great and powerful was the earthquake” (Rev 16:18).*

**Natural Earthquake:** Philo was a Jewish writer and philosopher between 20 B.C.E. and 50 C.E. He strove to bridge the gap between Greek philosophy and the Jewish tradition. In his book, *On Providence*, Philo rectifies the differences between the Stoic understanding of natural disasters and the Jewish understanding of divinely controlled disasters for punishment.

*“...and earthquakes, and pestilences, and the fall of thunderbolts, and things of that kind, are said indeed to be sent by God, but, in reality, they are not so, for God is absolutely not the cause of any evil whatever of any kind...” (Prov 2:53).*

**Divinely Inspired Earthquake:** A line from Psalm 68, from the collection of prayers, songs and poems known as the Psalter, represents an instance where the earth quakes in the divine presence because of the awesome power of God.

*“the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain at the presence of God, the God of Sinai, at the presence of God, the God of Israel” (Ps 68:8).*

## MODERN EVIDENCE-

**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA):**

- The ELCA mission provides a comprehensive support plan for recovery based on God-given human righteousness

**Presbyterian Church (U.S.A):**

- The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program reflects the forensic calculus of Calvinism that measures human deed to divine response

**Union for Reform Judaism (URJ):**

- Social justice is a prominent idea in the URJ's disaster response. They provide for immediate needs as well as the spiritual and emotional needs of those affected.

**United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ):**

- Disaster response from the USCJ is noticeably lacking. They have a rapid prayer response team but there is no coordinated effort in the aftermath



An artist's rendering of a scene from the Book of Revelation.



Ruins of Beit Shean in Israel, due to an earthquake in the 8th century BCE.



Depiction of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake.



Photo of the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

## CONCLUSIONS-

Notably, ancients did not feel constrained by anything except their belief in God so the writers had flexibility in how they set up their arguments, as represented by the three patterns I found. Contemporary theists abdicate from addressing the question of theodicy. One of the reasons they choose to sidestep the issue is because of the strong influence of Leibniz's concepts of theodicy and God. Leibniz's God is all-good, all-powerful, and all-wise. This is hard to reconcile with modern scientific thought.