

A disaster of 'biblical' proportions?

Four biblical themes to ponder: Four biblical themes to ponder

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

Commentators in the media have often invoked the term *biblical* to describe the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina, which has gone beyond our imagination and our explanatory categories. The term has not been used with any precision—it seems to mean simply vast or awe-inspiring.

What would it mean to view the catastrophe in genuinely biblical terms? Four biblical themes inform my own pondering.

1. The prophetic tradition relentlessly insists that creation, governed by God, has a moral dimension. For that reason liberals and conservatives can variously identify moral failures that could be taken as commensurate with the disaster. The biblical prophets do not flinch from such a calculus. The text that most directly connects natural disaster and moral failure is in Jeremiah 4:22-26, in which the poet imagines a step-by-step dismantling of creation that correlates in detail with the step-by-step creation described in Genesis 1. The poet invites us to watch creation as it is assaulted by God; the social context of Jeremiah provides ample motivation for the debilitating rage of Yahweh.

Such a moral calculus is in the text and is thinkable in our present circumstance. Most of us with any pastoral imagination, however, would not pursue this line of interpretation, if for no other reason than that the victims are not the perpetrators that one might identify. Such a view reflects a more crass supernaturalism than we readily entertain.

2. A second, more compelling prophetic option entertains the notion that Yahweh the Creator is at work in the world, but has not yet fully defeated the primordial powers of chaos that are still at work in and against creation. This biblical view works against an easy assertion of divine omnipotence. The text, along with lived

reality, makes it credible to see that chaos is on the loose, pushing against the boundaries of creation. The storm, in this view, exhibits Yahweh's mysterious impotence (neglect?) that is not unlike the impotence of God before deathly powers on that one Friday afternoon.

This view, not greatly developed in scripture, is evident in Isaiah 51:9-11. The poet, on behalf of Israel, summons God to be at work against "the dragon," who in this text is experienced as debilitating dislocation (exile). The imagery is not remote from present dislocation of body and heart in the current onslaught of cosmic negation. One can see in the storm the power of the negation of life that God, in this instant, is unable to restrain.

3. But the Bible will not for long ponder Yahweh's impotence. The Bible prefers to claim that God's power is beyond our normal calculus, so explanation is a futile enterprise. That surely is the claim of the speeches of God in the whirlwind in the book of Job. The human poser of theological questions has, in the end, no standing whereby God may be queried (Job 38:16-17, 25-27). Job, like every pondering theologian, is reduced to silence.

That mystery of God, moreover, is designed to exhibit the fiercer, unfettered power of God. Thus Psalm 29 can articulate the sweep of a divine storm that is without explanation and certainly without moral dimension (vv. 7-9a). Those who watched the storm can only join in doxology: "How great thou art!" The storm and the subsequent song have the effect of situating human wonderment and human imagining before a mystery that may be purposeful but in human horizon is so raw as to defy purposeful explanation.

4. Our inclination, however, is to move beyond any prophetic moral dimension, beyond the naming of chaos and beyond doxology to a more pastoral affirmation. Here again we may turn to a psalm, in this case Psalm 104, which voices the wonder of creation in a more benign, life-giving mode. The psalm also ponders the untamed sea (chaos) but now asserts that Yahweh has indeed tamed it. Yahweh has not only tamed it, but has reduced it to a plaything; chaos is now a source of enjoyment for Yahweh and constitutes no threat to creator or creation (vv. 25-26).

The very next verses of the psalm, moreover, go on to assert that Yahweh has made creation a reliable food-supplying system for all creatures (vv. 27-28). Thus creation is now completely protected from the threat of chaos and is able to fulfill its

mandate of “fruitfulness.” The end of the storm by the rule of God is an assurance of food and sustenance in an ordered world. Israel is unafraid and not under threat! But by verse 35, the psalm returns to Israel’s inescapable moral dimension, thus echoing the injunction and warning of Jeremiah. Creation is, even when made safe, joyous and fruitful by Yahweh, a domain of righteous, caring, covenantal behavior.

There is no one teaching on this subject in the Bible. Taking a biblical view of a natural disaster means:

- attending to a dimension of moral judgment,
- noticing where the power of chaos continues untamed,
- accepting that such a wave of destruction may be an exhibit of God’s greatness, and
- trusting that God prevails over chaos in order to sustain life and keep it safe.

When we have such texts in hand, the remainder of the work is imaginative, faithful interpretation.