THE CAUSES AND CURE OF EARTHQUAKES:
METHODISTS AND THE NEW MADRID EARTHQUAKES,
1811-1812
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Life in the Mississippi River valley was harsh during the first years of the nineteenth century. Much of the area had not even reached statehood status in a nation which had itself only recently celebrated its twentieth birthday. The area was difficult to travel through. Except for the rivers, there were virtually no good avenues to transport produce to market or to exchange items and news with the rest of the world. Backbreaking toil and drudgery were the orders of the day. A typical settler survived in the barest of shelters, usually the minimum required to prevent death by exposure, and their diet depended on corn in its various forms: eaten, distilled, or fed to the pigs.\(^1\) While it would be a gross overstatement to say that the region was totally inhospitable, it is fair to say that the settlers had little leisure time. There were few schools for the children to attend and little cultural fare for the adults. Religion did not seem to play a very important role in the lives of many.

A growing number of preachers appeared in the area eager to save the souls of the inhabitants. They enjoyed considerable success as the fervor of the camp meetings, which began around 1800, illustrates. These meetings had a particular appeal to the citizens of the west and tended to be very emotional in character, responding in some ways to the loneliness, isolation, and relatively low level of education found in the region. The emphasis of the sermons preached in the region, both at camp meetings and by the itinerant Methodist circuit riders, were grim in tone and often stressed the fury of God directed at the unrepentant. Sermons with titles such as “Knowing the Terror of the Lord,” and “The Time is Short,”\(^2\) which were preached by Francis Asbury in Ohio and Kentucky in 1815, were commonly heard by the populace. The forms in which the Lord’s displeasure might be expected could be interpreted in many ways, but for those preachers who were familiar with the works of John Wesley, there could be no doubt that one way in which God’s wrath might be visited


The New Madrid Earthquakes, 1811–1812

uppon humanity was through natural calamities, and in particular through earthquakes.

In a sermon entitled “The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes,” published in 1750, Wesley declared that:

Of all the judgements which the righteous God inflicts on sinners here, the most dreadful and destructive is an earthquake. . . . I aim to show you that earthquakes are the works of the Lord, and he only bringeth this destruction upon the earth. Now, that God is Himself the author, and sin the moral cause, of earthquakes (whatever the natural cause may be) cannot be denied by any who believe the Scriptures; for these are they which testify of Him. . . Earthquakes are set forth by the inspired writers as God's proper judicial act, or the punishment of sin: sin is the cause, earthquakes the effect, of his anger. 3

The western settlers, then, were acquainted with a God who could be expected to intervene in natural affairs. The acquaintance was in its most abstract form for most persons, however. This changed radically during the winter of 1811.

The evening of December 15, 1811 was clear and quiet. Settlements had, for the most part, retired for the night. All along the Mississippi River boats had stopped running, the occupants of the boats sleeping either on board or on sand bars. It was a typical, quiet December night. Then, shortly after 2:00 a.m., December 16, came the first of a series of severe earthquakes that shook the area every few days until early February, 1812, with aftershocks continuing for almost a year. 4

These earthquakes, named the New Madrid earthquakes after the Missouri town which was located near their epicenter, are now recognized as being the most severe earthquakes which have occurred in North America. It was felt with an intensity of level VII on the Modified Mercalli Intensity Scale over an area six times greater than the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. 5

The earthquakes were no mere curiosity for the inhabitants of the region. On that December night in 1811 they were awakened by the sound of breaking crockery, the crash of falling chimneys, the snapping of the timbers of the houses they were sleeping in, the roar of collapsing river banks, and the explosion of trees being torn apart. The people ran from homes in panic and awaited the sunrise. Daylight brought no relief, however. A second shock, as severe as the first, caused the ground to rise and fall like the waves of an ocean. Landslides were common and some formerly low areas were raised, while other high areas sank and were

covered with water. Huge waves were created on the Mississippi River. The current was briefly reversed, and thousands of trees fell into the river as the banks collapsed. New islands appeared where none had been previously, and older islands disappeared entirely. 6 James Finley, in Ohio during one of the last of the severe earthquakes, noted that he was awakened by "the rocking of the house in which I slept. It seemed as if my bedstead was on a rough sea, and the waves were rolling under it." 7 Eliza Bryon, who lived in New Madrid at the time, recalled the episode in a letter written to Lorenzo Dow in 1816:

On the 16th of December, 1811, about two o'clock, A.M., we were visited by a violent shock of an earthquake, accompanied by a very awful noise resembling loud but distant thunder, but more harsh and vibrating, which was followed, in a few minutes, by the complete saturation of the atmosphere with sulphurous vapor, causing total darkness. The screams of the affrighted inhabitants, running to and fro, not knowing where to go, or what to do—the cries of the fowls, and beasts of every species—the cracking of falling trees, and the roaring of the Mississippi, the current of which was retrograde for a few minutes, owing, as it is supposed, to an eruption in its bed—formed a scene truly horrible. From that time until about sunrise, a number of lighter shocks occurred; at which time one still more violent than the first, took place, with the same accompaniments as the first, and the terror which had been excited in every one, and indeed, in all animal nature, was now, if possible, doubled. The inhabitants fled in every direction to the country, supposing (if it can be admitted that their minds were exercised at all) that there was less danger at a distance from, than near to, the river. In one person, a female, the alarm was so great that she fainted and could not be recovered. 8

Referring to the February, 1812 earthquakes Bryon commented:

... On the seventh, at about four o'clock, A.M., a concussion took place, so much more violent than those which had preceded it, that it is denominated the hard shock. The awful darkness of the atmosphere, which, as formerly, was saturated with sulphurous vapor, and the violence of the tempestuous, thundering noise that accompanied it, together with all the other phenomena mentioned as attending the former ones, formed a scene, the description of which would require the most sublimely fanciful imagination. At first, the Mississippi seemed to recede from its banks, and its waters gathered up like a mountain, leaving, for a moment, many boats, which were here [New Madrid] on their way to New Orleans, on the bare sand, in which time the poor sailors made their escape from them. It then rising fifteen or twenty feet perpendicularly, and expanding, as it were, at the same moment, the banks were overflowed with a retrograde current rapid as a torrent; the boats which before had been left on the sand, were now torn from their moorings, and suddenly driven up a little creek,

6 Fuller, 10.
7 James B. Finley, Autobiography: or, Pioneer Life in the West. (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1854), 238.
8 Lorenzo Dow, Perambulations of Cosmopolite; or Travels and Labors of Lorenzo Dow, in Europe and America. (New York: Richard C. Valentine, 1855), 242-243. For another account see: John Bradbury, "Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811," in Early Western Travels 1748-1846, edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1904), 204-211.
at the mouth of which they laid, to the distance, in some instances, of nearly a quarter of a mile. The river, falling immediately as rapidly as it had risen, receded within the banks again with such violence, that it took with it whole groves of young cottonwood trees which ledged its borders. They were broken off with such regularity, in some instances, that persons, who had not witnessed the fact, could be with difficulty persuaded that it had not been the work of art. A great many fish were left on the banks, being unable to keep pace with the water. The river was literally covered with the wrecks of boats; and it is said, that one was wrecked, in which there was a lady and six children, all of whom were lost. In all the hard shocks mentioned, the earth was horribly torn to pieces; the surface of hundreds of acres was, from time to time, covered over, of various depths, by the sand which issued from the fissures, which were made in great numbers all over this country, some of which closed up immediately after they had vomited forth their sand and water, which, it must be remarked was the matter generally thrown up. In some places, however, there was a substance somewhat resembling coal, or impure stone-coal, thrown up with the sand. 9

No doubt some of Mrs. Bryon’s descriptions are a bit exaggerated, but the destruction caused by those earthquakes was both very real and very far reaching. The tremors were felt in Canada, New Orleans, Detroit, and even Boston. The hardest hit section was the area along the Mississippi River between the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh parallels, where almost 2,000 earthquakes were recorded in a three-month period. 10

The damage to the region was so severe that William Rector, hired by the Territory of Missouri to survey its lands, observed that the soil in the area devastated by the earthquake had been among the richest in the territory, “but since the earthquake it has been so damaged that it is almost totally deserted and I doubt if the value of the land would even equal the cost of surveying it.” 11

Almost as quickly as the settlers realized that disaster was in their midst, they began to wonder about its cause, and numerous reasons were advanced. In Putnam, Ohio, a pious lady who had the reputation of shouting at camp meetings ran into the streets when a severe quake was felt, shouting “Glory, glory, glory to God! My Savior is coming! I am my Lord’s and he is mine!” 12

Many inhabitants were quite certain that the earthquakes were the forerunner of approaching judgment, and consequently there was a tremendous rush into religion. 13 It was suddenly fashionable to have opened

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9 Ibid.
10 Walter Brownlow Posey, The Development of Methodism in the Old Southwest. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1933), 50.
12 Finley, Autobiography, 239.
Bibles nearby and to organize impromptu prayer meetings. To the superstitious populace it seemed that the earthquakes were a direct visitation from God which had been brought about as punishment for their sinful natures, no matter how trivial their sins may have been. One ten-year-old boy had been gathering hazelnuts on Sunday, and when the earthquakes began he was certain that his errant ways must be the cause. Accordingly, he quickly carried the nuts back into the woods and scattered them behind a stump. Unfortunately, his action did not stop the earthquakes.

Others made no effort to stop the quakes, but prepared to welcome Jesus upon his imminent arrival. Such a person was Valentine Cook, who lived near Russellville, Kentucky. A graduate of Cokesbury College, and a former Methodist circuit rider, Cook had located along with his wife Tabitha. When the tremors began, he ran from his house shouting, “My Jesus is coming.” His wife chased him, imploring, “Don’t leave me!” He continued to run, however, saying: “My Jesus is coming and I can’t wait for you.”

The inhabitants of the small wilderness settlements were not alone in feeling that God’s hand was responsible for the disasters. The Missouri Territorial Legislature observed in 1814 that of all calamities which “it has pleased the Supreme Being of the universe, to visit the inhabitants of this earth,” none are worse than earthquakes.

Not everyone felt that God was the cause of the tremors, though. In addition to the young man and his hazelnuts, one citizen was certain that the cause lay in a comet which had been seen a few months earlier. He described that comet as having two horns, and explained that the earth had become lodged between them, and the shocks were simply efforts of the earth to surmount the horns.

Regardless of the cause of the quakes, they produced a considerable level of anxiety for the populace, who reacted in what one writer described as a great awakening. Calls for preachers to come to specific settlements or homes became commonplace. One Arkansas settler sent word that he wished to see the nearest preacher quickly, because the “great day of judgement had come.” An Indiana Methodist circuit rider observed that the whole country had become alarmed and the “most vile and hardened sinners began to tremble and quake, and go to meeting and weep and pray.” He noted that some men were converted and became preachers themselves.

14Bradbury, 209.
17Carter, 729-730.
18Bradbury, 209.
when only recently their own conversion had been regarded as most unlikely.  

Much of the populace felt that God was directly responsible for the earthquakes and that they were signs of His retribution. Others, who realized what earthquakes were in the light of eighteenth century science, were often still very much in awe of God’s power as revealed in the natural phenomena, so that they also often sought to draw themselves nearer to God, to develop an “acquaintance with God that they might be at peace with him.”

The preachers in the region were quick to rise to the challenge. There appears to be little or no evidence of preachers advising their flocks that the tremors were not the work of God, but were, rather, natural phenomena which could be understood empirically. There are an almost limitless number of examples of ministers who advised their listeners that the quakes were the work of a wrathful God, often with remarkable results. James Gunn, a Methodist circuit rider in Tennessee, began his work on the Red River circuit in 1811, just in time for the earthquakes. News of his arrival was widely acclaimed and he attracted large numbers of people to his services, partly because many of the local residents had never heard a Methodist preacher before. Many came as a result of hearing reports that Gunn was not afraid of the earthquakes. In Arkansas, then part of the Missouri Territory, a full revival ensued which was described as wide-spread and glorious, and which encompassed the whole territory. Methodist Bishop Paine later reported that “the Lord had not only terribly shaken the earth, but had also mercifully shaken the hearts of the people.”

There were those who were somewhat skeptical about the motives of the suddenly aroused populace, suspicious no doubt that the movement could be one away from the horrors of earthquakes rather than one toward God. One pioneer Missouri Methodist preacher noted that the people had “become alarmed and fled, many to Christ, but more into the church, for refuge.” Statements such as this were common and lead one to believe that large numbers of the Methodist preachers were genuinely concerned about the motivation for this new-found piety. One writer commiserated that it was truly human nature that would cause people to hear the gospel preached, Christ’s mercy proclaimed, God’s goodness and still fail to acknowledge God and seek repentance. And then when difficulties

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22Jewell, 26-27.
23Ibid., 27, 49.
arose they ran to shelter to hide from the sight of God. “How much genuine piety results from this state of things, is not for man to determine,” but after the danger was past he suspected that many would turn “like the sow that was washed, to wallowing in the mire.”

The preachers, then, generally approached the religious excitement engendered by the earthquakes with a healthy skepticism.

Back on the east coast, Bishop Asbury was apparently ignorant of the severity of the disaster which had befallen much of the Western Conference. He was not at all ignorant as to the possible effects the disasters might have on the church, however, commenting in a letter to a merchant in Baltimore that the earthquakes have “been most favourable to the work of God.”

Regardless of their concern for the efficacy of the new piety, many preachers seem to have adopted Asbury’s thought that, in spite of all else, the result of the quakes was work that was favorable to God. Accordingly, there was a noticeable effort to capitalize on the disaster to bring the wayward into the fold. At the forefront of this effort was none other than James Finley, the preacher who was already well known in camp meeting circles. He maintained that while he had enjoyed some success with revival prior to the earthquakes, they had been instrumental in increasing the interest in religion. He noted that large numbers of people who had shown no interest in religion prior to the quakes suddenly flocked to meetings. The numbers of converts were said to be great, and success was to be found almost everywhere. Of course, Finley could point with pride to a few specific instances in which he felt God had made a particularly successful use of the quakes. One such location was Rush Creek, an area that Finley characterizes as full of wickedness and drunkenness. On one night, Finley’s message to a group of men was interrupted by a tremor which severely shook the cabin they were in. Finley immediately jumped on the table so he could be heard by everyone present and shouted, “for the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?” Finley noted that many found pardon and salvation, and meetings were crowded with anxious souls. The well-known ministers were not the only ones who attracted large crowds, however. Finley reported that John Crowe, the circuit rider of the Duck River Circuit in Tennessee, attracted thousands to services held both day and night throughout 1812.

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26 Finley, Autobiography, 239-240.
The question which begs to be addressed amidst this outpouring of religious enthusiasm, and in some cases furor, is how church membership and support was affected. Reference has been made previously to James Finley's assertion that thousands flocked to services in the Duck River circuit in Tennessee. Membership figures of this circuit for the years of the earthquakes reveal that in 1811, the year prior to the earthquakes, there were 417 members in the Methodist society. The year of the earthquakes, 1812, 440 members were recorded, and in the following year 604 members were in the Methodist society. This marks a 69% increase in membership in a two-year period. Certainly a phenomenal feat, but somewhat short of the "thousands" Finley mentioned.

In New Madrid, Missouri, near the epicenter of the earthquakes, membership in the Methodist society grew from 30 to 165 in the years 1811–1813. This undoubtedly meant that virtually every man, woman, and child in New Madrid became a member of the society. After 1813, the membership figures declined as rapidly as they had grown, although this can be partially explained by the large migration from the area in the years immediately following the earthquakes.29 The total Methodist membership in Missouri Territory in 1811 was 517. In 1812 it rose to 898, and then declined to 839 in 1813. These figures for the territory as a whole can be seen in marked contrast to those of New Madrid mentioned previously and are part of a gradual increase in membership throughout the nineteenth century.

There is one intriguing anomaly in Missouri Methodist church records for these years, however. Per capita giving increased from two cents to seventy-three cents between 1811 and 1812, and then declined to seven cents the following year. The seventy-three cent figure is very unusual. This level of giving would not be reached again during all of the nineteenth century.30 Was this increase in Methodist giving in the area affected by the earthquakes directly related to this disaster?

There is every indication that many of the inhabitants of the region felt that the earthquakes were the result of a direct action of God which had been undertaken as a result of some shortcoming in their own lives. Naturally they were eagerly searching for some way to stop God's wrath. The preachers in the area, including the Methodist circuit riders, do not appear to have made any effort to calm or reassure these anguished

people. Rather, they chose to use the earthquakes as a means to attract and enlist the citizenry into active participation in religious institutions. In this regard they seem to have been extraordinarily successful.

However, the results were short lived. The early skepticism of some of the preachers was well founded. The tactics that led people into the church because of fear of earthquakes seem to have been effective only as long as the earthquakes themselves were seen as real threats. As soon as the earthquakes stopped, so did many people's interest in religion. This seems most apparent in the Methodist statistics from the New Madrid area, which had huge increases in both membership and financial support during the years of the earthquakes, and equally huge declines immediately thereafter.

The earthquakes were followed by a great deal of religious interest and discussion, but the effect of this interest was short lived. The tremendous growth of Methodism in the Mississippi valley during the early nineteenth century was undoubtedly due to a large number of factors, and certainly the New Madrid earthquakes was among them, but its long-term effects on Methodist growth in the region was negligible. In fact, Bishop Asbury recorded in his journal in 1812 simply that "I am confronted with an increase of eight thousand in the Tennessee Conference."³¹ He made no mention of the earthquakes or any effects which they may have had at any point in his journals. The earthquakes, and the religious interest they generated, remain an interesting footnote in the story of Methodism, but cannot be seen as anything more.

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