

# The earthquake angel: contemporary legend on the New Madrid Fault

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The New Madrid Fault is a geological formation running from Marked Tree, Arkansas, through New Madrid, Missouri, to Cairo, Illinois. Major earthquakes occurred in this area in 1811–1812 and again in 1895. The New Madrid earthquakes, as they are known by seismologists, are characterized as the greatest in intensity experienced in the United States, surpassing even the San Francisco earthquakes (Hudson 1947:148). The 1811 quake created Reelfoot Lake, twenty miles long and seven miles wide, in western Tennessee and caused an island in the Mississippi River near Vicksburg to disappear, taking with it a band of river pirates (Hudson 148). In addition, popular reaction to the earthquakes as a warning from God to the sinful in the Louisiana territory is recorded in a homiletic ballad of the 1811–1812 New Madrid earthquakes entitled, “A Call to the People of Louisiana.” The second stanza concludes:

The Lord from Heaven look'ed down,  
And set the earth to shaking.

The ballad further warns that “The scriptures are fulfilling,” admonishing the people to repent and “Prepare, before it is too late” (Hudson 1947:149–150).

For almost a century no major earthquake has occurred in this area. Consequently, the prediction by self-taught climatologist Iben Browning of Tijares, New Mexico, that there would be another major earthquake on the New Madrid Fault within forty-eight hours of December 3, 1990, led to concern, anxiety,

and sometimes near-panic in the area—despite the fact that the scientific community universally discredited Browning's prediction. Browning based his prediction on solar-lunar gravitational pull, and scientists give no credence to this method.

Though there had been no major quake in this area since 1895, Browning's prediction brought forth folk beliefs and rumors of portents. A 1980 article by Howell and Lott deals with the folk belief that "impending earthquakes are foreshadowed by portents" and suggests that if beliefs are psychologically valuable to a group, they will enter and persist in a belief system. The article also says that residents of an area who feel very vulnerable to earthquake disasters "may feel safer if they believe they possess some means of predicting an impending earthquake. In the absence of signs of a coming earthquake, they could assume there is no immediate danger" (Howell and Lott 1980:337).

A recent example of unreliable earthquake prophecy in Italy (*terremoto annunciato*) is reported by Jan Brunvand, who quotes the Italian newsletter *Tutte Storie*: "In the afternoon of January 4, 1991, a rumor was circulating in Turin that the whole town would be destroyed by a terrible quake in the night. Everybody talked about it, nothing happened.... Rumors of impending catastrophes are originated from unconscious fears unchained by some trigger" (quoted in Brunvand 1993:248). Neither the "fears" nor the "trigger" are identified further.

In the weeks prior to December 3, 1990, there were reports in the New Madrid Fault area of birds flying backwards, animals behaving strangely, and rivers and lakes "boiling." In Jonesboro, Arkansas, rumors of portents of disaster were rampant. A widespread belief was that the numbers 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-0 had significance. 1 2 indicated the month, 3 the day, 4:56 the time, 7.8 the magnitude as measured on the Richter scale, and 9 0 the year.

At Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, my students had numerous stories about earthquake predictions and portents—in effect being an indicator of the level of stress on the part of area residents. One student said, "Earthquake rumors abounded in the dormitory on campus. Several young men received phone calls telling them to come home because Reelfoot Lake was

boiling or that some scientists were detecting a strong undertow going upstream in the Mississippi River. I even heard one guy who was claiming that his uncle's chickens wouldn't go into the coop to roost at night and an old dog who slept under the porch steps began sleeping in the yard."<sup>1</sup> Another student said, "I've heard that animals do weird things before an earthquake hits. One woman I know bought a chicken solely for this purpose" [to observe its behavior].<sup>2</sup>

Other rumors that were widespread involved reports of reactions to the portents and predictions—parents and others reacting to an uncertain situation. Many students said that they had heard that Iben Browning had predicted the 1989 San Francisco earthquake within hours and that he had predicted the Iranian quake to within a day of accuracy. In Jonesboro, there were rumors that area schools had been issued body bags and that teachers had written the name of each child on his or her forehead with a marking pencil.

At least two weeks prior to the predicted quake, stories were in oral circulation about angels near St Louis stopping drivers to warn them not to go to southeast Missouri and angels near Memphis warning drivers not to go to northeast Arkansas. A folklore student asked me: "Have you heard about the 'earthquake angel'?" She then said:

It's sort of like the "vanishing hitchhiker." A child stops motorists and gets into their cars to warn them about the earthquake. It's supposed to be an angel, and it disappears after giving the warning. I heard it happened to someone near Memphis. People are calling it the "earthquake angel."<sup>3</sup>

Another version of the story is that a hitchhiker tells the driver that the earthquake will occur on December 5 (not December 3) and then disappears. Another student said:

I heard a story of a woman who lived in Cairo, Illinois. She was driving down the road and saw a man hitchhiking. Since he was wearing a suit, she thought it would be okay to give him a ride. While he's riding in the backseat of the car, they start talking about the earthquake prediction. He tells her that it's not going to happen on the 3rd but rather will happen on December 5 at 2:45 pm. Then he gives several Biblical references to support his theory. After a little while, the lady looks in the rearview mirror and the man is gone. She goes to the police station to report it

even though she knows they'll think she made it up. The officer that is assigned to take her story tells her that they've had six other reports of the same thing happening.<sup>4</sup>

A third version is from a freshman composition student at ASU who related the following to my class:

Apparently this guy was driving down the road near here in Arkansas, and he picked up this hitchhiker—sat in the backseat. He warned the driver that there was going to be an earthquake. When the driver turned around to question the hitchhiker, he had disappeared. It must have been a warning from the great beyond or something.<sup>5</sup>

On December 4, 1990, the *Arkansas Gazette* reported similar stories about hitchhiking angels, calling them "urban myths":

Urban myth roaming the Midwest: An Arkansas driver picked up a hitchhiker who said Iben Browning's predicted earthquake would strike the New Madrid Fault Wednesday, not Monday. When the driver turned around to look at the hitchhiker, he was gone (4-A).

Similarly, a CBS Newscast at 5:30 pm (CST) on Sunday, December 2, 1990, from New Madrid, Missouri, gave reports of "angels near St Louis warning drivers not to come to southeast Missouri."

The earthquake angel stories were in oral circulation at least two weeks before any report by the media, and they can be considered as an emergent form of a contemporary legend since these are narratives dealing with a threat that had recently emerged. Bill Ellis has noted that contemporary legends "allege to deal with events that have 'just happened,' or with threats that have recently emerged" (Ellis 1990:2).

More precisely, the earthquake angel narratives can be considered a version of an older contemporary legend, the widely studied Vanishing Hitchhiker, which was used as the basis of studies by Beardsley and Hankey in 1942 and 1943, and more recently made popular by Jan Brunvand in his first book of urban legends (1981). Though in the best known versions, the phantom hitchhiker is a passive young girl who (usually) was killed on her prom night, in other versions the hitchhiker has a more active role. In the 1942 Beardsley and Hankey article, the hitchhiker gives predictions or warnings. William A. Wilson

(1975) shows the adaptation of the Three Nephites of the Mormons to the Vanishing Hitchhiker legend. In Lydia Fish's 1976 article, "Jesus on the Thru'way," the ghost is identified as Jesus or an Angel. Gillian Bennett observes that prophetic ghosts tend to appear in rural versions. Bennett also points out that in older stories where ghosts are in prophetic or active roles there is no coda to establish definitely the phantom hitchhiker's supernatural nature (1984:54-55). More modern ghosts tend to be passive—the coda is needed to clearly establish their nature. In a recent version, "Hitchhiking Angels in Holland," the hitchhiker says he is an angel, announces the End of the World, and then disappears. When the driver reports this to the police, he is told, "You are by no means the first to tell me" (Jans 1991:5).

The earthquake angel narratives merge earthquake prediction rumor with the vanishing hitchhiker legend. By comparing the earthquake angel to the vanishing hitchhiker, my student was reacting to the story not as the "folk," but as a student of folklore. She recognizes a pattern and identifies it, noting that people are calling it the earthquake angel. In the second variant, the most wholly developed, justification is given for picking up the hitchhiker (he is wearing a suit) and Biblical quotations are given to support the warning. There is also a coda (the report to the police). The teller, however, never uses the term angel. In the third variant, though not fully developed as a legend, the teller makes a judgment: "It must have been a warning from the great beyond or something."

In relating the earthquake angel story, the narrators did not express overtly that they believed it to be true, but neither did they completely disregard it. Some seemed to express a "need" for it to be true or at least possible. That is, were there really a threat of an earthquake, there would be angels sent to warn them. Though some—particularly among the university faculty—disregarded the angels as ludicrous, most people did not deny the possibility. There seemed to be various gradations of belief.

Bill Ellis, in the Introduction to the special issue of *Western Folklore* on Contemporary Legend, noted that "contemporary legends often embody an *emergency*—a social problem that urgently needs attention" and that they reflect and define social stresses (1990:3). The earthquake angel stories, not suprisingly,

serve just that function in that they deal with relieving tensions and fears about stressful *physical* threats, geological phenomena over which people have no control and often little understanding. Since even scientists have no clearcut answers regarding the prediction of earthquakes, there were no assurances to counteract the anxiety produced by Browning's prediction.

With physical threats (e.g. earthquakes) as opposed to social stress, people have no power at all to intervene or to change the course of the threatened event through their actions. They can only prepare for such eventualities by laying in emergency supplies, going to a shelter, leaving the area, and the like. When human limitations and vulnerability are made so clear, there may be critical need for "signs" or messengers, assurances of some higher power looking out for the people.

Bill Clements points out in an article on the 1973 Jonesboro tornado that folklore often "reveals attitudinal truths even when factual data is imprecise" (Clements 1986:128). He equates the grass roots attitudes toward the tornado with what Alan Dundes has called "folk ideas" or traditional attitudes of a group regarding man and his relationship with the universe (see Dundes 1971). In doing so Clements comments, "One folk idea that has been part of the culture of many groups which believe in a transcendent supernatural being is a belief in that supernatural being's direct interference in human affairs" (1986:129). He further says that the basic folk idea, with regard to the 1973 tornado, was divine providence—and he refers to "providential interpretations of the tornado" (1986:131). He cites reports of a "band of angels" over Jonesboro, interpreted as sending protection to guard over "God's people" (1986:135). The grassroots reactions to Browning's prediction reveals many of the same attitudes, in that, in both cases there were reports of angels.

Peter L. Berger in *A Rumor of Angels* refers to angels as "God's messengers as His signals in reality" (1970:95).

In the prophetic visions they surround the throne of God. Again and again, the pages of both the Old and New Testaments, they appear as messengers (*angeloi*) of this God, signaling His transcendence as well as His presence in the world of man. Above all, angels signal God's concern for the world both in judgment and in redemption (1970:94).

Berger further comments that "We are, whether we like it or

not, in a situation in which transcendence has been reduced to a rumor" (1970:95). Given the historical providential interpretation of natural disasters in the New Madrid area and the apparent belief in a supernatural being's direct interference or responsibility, it is not surprising that people would expect "angels" to appear. Though the hitchhikers in the legends were people, a man or a child, they were referred to as angels.

The relationship of legend to folk belief has often been noted by folklorists. Patrick Mullen points out that legends function to support generalized beliefs rather than specific superstitions (Mullen 1971:410). The earthquake angel legend seems to serve as evidence of the continuing folk idea of divine providence. This emergent legend may also be a reflection of the perception that the culture has moved, or is moving away, from a folk belief in divine providence—and the need to revive or reinforce that belief—during a time of alleged, or perceived, crisis. Ellis has pointed out that "one role of legends may be to redefine reality in a way that restores the narrators' control over chaotic situations" (1990:5). The earthquake angel legends appear to do just that, in that they seem to function as a way of maintaining control when faced with the potential threat of chaos.<sup>6</sup>

The earthquake angel legend appears to provide an acceptable indication that divine providence is still working, and that God is looking out for us, by sending his angels as messengers. The reality that there was, in fact, no earthquake does not seriously impune the folk idea of divine providence. When the stressful threat is there, assurances are needed. If not, the beliefs and legends to support them can simply recede into the background to be called upon when the next threat occurs, explaining them away, along with the non-disaster, as a last minute reprieve from the Almighty.

Equally important is the reflection of folk ideas and world-view evident in popular reaction to Browning's prediction. The popular acceptance of Browning's prediction, despite the fact that area seismologists—often associated with universities—made great efforts to inform people that it was scientifically baseless, reflects the common attitude in this area of suspicion and mistrust towards science and intellectuals, combined with providential interpretation. The portents and stories about the predicted earthquake were not only psychologically valuable in

dealing with anxiety, but they also re-inforced belief in Browning's prediction and justified taking it seriously. When the predicted time for the quake passed with no tremors, the threat was generally dismissed (along with reports of portents), and the earthquake angel stories were no longer being told or reported—an example of a "(con)temporary" legend whose motivating context of stress was gone. What caused the emergent legend to come to a halt was not primarily that the message of the alleged angels was—in hindsight—false (often things continue to be reported after the event), but that the motivating stressful situation was gone. Angels were no longer needed.

Seismologists do, in fact, predict a 10% chance of a major earthquake in the area in the next 15 years. Though their prediction should be more reliable than Browning's, it has failed to produce any continuing popular commitment to general earthquake preparedness in the area. This again reflects folk ideas and worldview in regard to scientists. Dundes says that folk ideas include "underlying assumptions held by members of a given culture" (1971:95). One clear assumption in the northeast Arkansas area is that scientists and university professors, in particular, are somehow not to be trusted. This area is strongly conservative and committed to traditional religious beliefs, and advice from a university seismologist seems to be considered less reliable than the prediction of Iben Browning. There is an interesting conflict, particularly noticeable in this area, between what David Hufford (1982) calls traditions of belief and traditions of disbelief.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps a too ready disregard for important folk beliefs in the area by intellectuals, including university professors, has led to a mistrust of the expertise of the university community. The folk idea of divine providence in regard to natural phenomena is in direct conflict with a scientific/intellectual view of the world. Curiously, it appears that those who accept the scientific explanations and predictions are in a cognitive minority<sup>8</sup> in this area. This is evident in the widespread disregard for the necessity for general earthquake preparedness in the area and the assumption that after the date of Browning's prediction had passed, the area was "safe." This belief is reflected in a joke popular in the Jonesboro area shortly after December 3:

Did you hear about the flood on the New Madrid Fault? —  
Everyone poured out their bottled water.

Perhaps not suprisingly, to date there have been no emergent legends about the “big quake” actually predicted by seismologists. This scientifically more reliable prediction is neither specific enough (as to time) nor statistically great enough to produce the anxiety and concern of Browning’s prediction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Collected from Robert Seesongood, student at Arkansas State University (ASU), 3 December 1990, Jonesboro, Arkansas.

<sup>2</sup>Collected by William M. Clements, from Mitzi Roetzel, student at ASU, 3 December 1990, Jonesboro, Arkansas.

<sup>3</sup>Collected from Elisa Masterson, graduate student at ASU, 26 November 1990, Jonesboro, Arkansas.

<sup>4</sup>Collected by William M. Clements, from Amy Foreman, student at ASU, 3 December 1990, Jonesboro, Arkansas.

<sup>5</sup>Collected from Charlotte Thomas, student at ASU, 3 December 1990, Jonesboro, Arkansas.

<sup>6</sup>In an article on San Francisco earthquake narratives, Regina Bendix proposes that “Personal narratives are ... the primary means at an individual’s disposal to regain order out of chaos” (1990:333). She further says, “Sharing one’s story is the initial communal step towards order” (1990:334). It seems that contemporary legend serves to maintain order in dealing with potential chaos or amorphous threats. After an actual disaster, personal narrative permits the processing and ordering of actual chaotic or traumatic experience. For studies of rumor after a quake, see Prasad 1935 and 1950.

<sup>7</sup>Hufford points out, “The religionist is as much a skeptic of the materialist framework as is the materialist a skeptic of the supernatural” (1982:48).

<sup>8</sup>Peter Berger defines cognitive minority as “a group of people whose view of the world differs significantly from the one generally taken for granted in their society” (1970:6).

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