

## Chapter Five: Divine Action, Human Action, and Nature's Regularities<sup>1</sup>



In Moshe's world the two explanaccepts *divine action* and/or *human action* accounted for every object and every event. As time passed, humans became aware of the regularities of nature—processes that followed “the laws of nature,” seemingly without God's direct intervention. Consequently, actions that had been attributed directly to God, such as the rising of the sun and its steady motion across the sky, now moved from *divine action* to *nature's regularities*. While there is very little difference between Moshe's explanaccept *human actions* and Ian Michael's, there is a profound difference between “God's doings” (*divine actions*) as Moshe understood them then and the way Ian Michael understands *divine action* now.

This radical change is evident as Ian Michael reads in his Bible, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Prov. 16:33 NIV). Moshe understood that God controlled the outcome of every casting of a lot, whether a piece of wood, a stone, or a bone. How could he have thought this way? Didn't he know that the way a lot landed was determined by identifiable (though not practically measurable) physical forces? No, he didn't. The suite of explanaccepts with which his mind worked was a circumscribed package in which *divine action* interacted with *human action* to explain everything that happened. In the case of a lot tossed into a Hebrew lap, the outcome could not be explained as a result of *human action*, because no person could possible control how a lot landed; so it could only be accounted for (that is, explained) as an action of YAHWEH.

### Explanaccepts in Circumscribed Packages

A package or set of explanaccepts is always circumscribed and omni-competent: everything that happens and everything that exists is explained by one (or more) of the explanaccepts in the package. This is still true, even though our set of explanaccepts has grown from two to three. Every event of which we become aware is understood according to one or more of our three current explanaccepts. Often we do not know and/or cannot explain the exact method or means leading up to a particular event; but we always know the explanaccept(s) by which an event is understood. Take earthquakes, for example. We usually explain them in terms of the *regularities of nature*, attributing them to Earth's tectonic plates jostling each other. We think that these plates ride on the viscous but liquid magma (asthenosphere) that separates them from Earth's core, and that the magma is kept liquid by radioactively generated heat.



Explaining earthquakes as a result of *nature's regularities* is a relatively recent development, and we can pinpoint when it occurred. In 1727 and 1755 moderate earthquakes shook Boston and nearby regions of New England, and the tremors motivated many sermons in local churches. Most of the preachers attributed the earthquakes to God's wrath (*divine action*) and left the matter there. One notable sermon by Thomas Prince (1687-1758), however, distinguished between the “first cause” of the earthquakes—God's judgment—and their natural or “second cause.” That is, the earthquakes also had a physical origin as a result of natural processes. The particular natural explanation that Prince favored was the expansion of vapors in caverns deep underground, thus shaking the earth's surface. Here, as in the Flood accounts, is a moment in explanaccept development that was captured in a document and is thus available for examination. In this case, earthquakes are observed (in 1755) in the process of being

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<sup>1</sup> Here “nature's regularities” are those that are related to matter, energy, space, and time.

transferred from the traditional explanaccept *divine action* (God's wrath) to the relatively new explanaccept *nature's regularities* (expanding vapors in underground caverns).

Prince was able to explain earthquakes because he and his listeners had acquired the new explanaccept *regularities of nature*, and this, combined with *divine action*, proved to be a more adequate explanation than did *divine action* alone. This change in understanding the cause of earthquakes was "caught in the act" when Prince utilized two explanaccepts simultaneously—the "first cause" of God's judgment (*divine action*) and the "second cause" of expanding vapors (*nature's regularities*). Now, however, most scientifically informed Christians understand earthquakes without referring to *divine action* at all.

### ***Regularities of Nature Enlarge Scientific Knowledge, Divine Action Extends Theological Discernment***

Relocating earthquakes from the explanaccept *divine action* did not occur until *nature's regularities* were well enough understood to take over "earthquake responsibility." So simply assigning a different understanding of *divine action* to a "different time" and/or a "different culture" seriously understates the magnitude of the changes that occurred between Moshe's time and Ian Michael's. It is a *major transformation of worldview*. Thomas Prince's New Englanders could accept his proposal that earthquakes were not simply an expression of God's wrath precisely because other societal forces in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had made it possible for educated New Englanders to attach meaning to the idea of "first cause" (*divine action*) and "second cause" (*nature's regularities*). A few generations earlier, this attribution of meaning would not have been possible; and to Moshe, millennia earlier, it would have made no sense at all.

Why are the Flood accounts in the Bible at all if, in truth, they document a very early and (to our way of thinking) inadequate stage of understanding of "who God is" and "what God does"? The usual answer is that each of the Biblical writers was a child of his time and culture. Furthermore, divine inspiration acted not on the words of the Biblical text but on the minds of the writers, who were "God penmen, not His pen." We believe this explanation is valid, and we propose also that the Flood accounts display the reason why more can and should be said—namely, that the particularities of *divine action* develop and change along with the development of the explanaccept *nature's regularities*.

### **Back to Genesis**

Those who heard the original accounts of the Great Flood recognized that this catastrophe could not be attributed to human action; so the cause had to be some kind of divine action as is reported in the opening paragraphs of both the YAHWEH and Elohim accounts. But the Hebrews' developing understanding of ethical monotheism (especially the *ethical* part) did not fit comfortably with the idea of God arbitrarily causing the chaos and mayhem of the Flood; it was not the sort of thing that God would do. But the catastrophic Flood had in fact occurred, and it required an explanation. At that time in human history there was no other rational possibility than to understand it as part of "what God does"; but that did not fit with the understanding of "who God is." So the explanaccept *human action* was invoked—not as the physical cause of the Flood (for only God could do that), but as its moral cause.

The Genesis narrative of the Flood reveals a circumscribed explanaccept package in operation. For Moshe, the Flood was satisfactorily explained (by human sin), while preserving the developing ethical understanding of God. Similarly, 3,000 years later, a developing understanding of *nature's regularities* explained earthquakes not simply as an expression of God's wrath against human sin. Between Moshe's time and Ian Michael's, each step in the developing understanding of God has involved advancing knowledge of *human action* and *divine action* as these two explanaccepts have interacted with *nature's regularities*. This development, as reported by Hebrew writers in 39 "books" over ten centuries, laid the groundwork for the theologically revolutionary Christ event, which transformed for all time the human understanding of who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us.