

Bachmann's prophecy, joke or not, has lots of company

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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(RNS) Presidential candidate Michele Bachmann is facing a flood of criticism for suggesting, perhaps in jest, that God sent Hurricane Irene and the East Coast earthquake to jolt Washington into changing its spendthrift ways.

"I don't know how much God has to do to get the attention of the politicians," the Minnesota Republican said Sunday (Aug. 28) at a campaign rally in Florida. "We've had an earthquake; we've had a hurricane. He said, 'Are you going to start listening to me here?'"

Bachmann's campaign said her remarks were wisecracks, not prophecy. "Obviously she was saying it in jest," campaign spokeswoman Alice Stewart told the website Talking Points Memo. Videos show Bachmann and the audience laughing during the comments.

But the Old Testament is rife with references to finding God's will in the whirlwind -- from floods to the fire that consumed Sodom and Gomorrah. And many of Bachmann's fellow evangelicals surmise that storms and hurricanes can carry divine messages, a recent survey suggests.

Nearly six in 10 white evangelicals believe natural disasters are a sign from God, according to a survey conducted last March by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service. A majority also believe that God punishes a nation for its citizens' sins, the survey found.

That view was controversially expressed six years ago, when evangelical broadcaster Pat Robertson, citing the Book of Leviticus, linked Hurricane Katrina to the country's abortion laws. Natural

disaster prophecies have become almost commonplace for Robertson, who also blamed Haiti's 2010 earthquake on an 18th century "pact with the devil."

(Robertson also said last week that a crack in the Washington Monument caused by an earthquake was a sign that Jesus' return is imminent.)

Evangelicals' belief in a God who influences human history and trust in an inerrant Bible inform their views on natural disasters, said Robert P. Jones, CEO of Public Religion Research Institute.

In that sense, Bachmann has plenty of company among evangelicals, and more than a few Bible verses to back her up.

Psalm 107, for example, says God "commands and raises the stormy wind, which lifts up the waves. ... He turns rivers into a wilderness and the watersprings into dry ground."

In the Book of Jonah, God sent a mighty tempest upon the sea to force the reluctant prophet to take a message of repentance to Nineveh. And, of course, there's the flood that sent Noah adrift for 40 days and nights, sent to cleanse the earth of its wickedness.

The God that giveth rain can also withhold it, the Bible suggests.

"If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit," God tells the Israelites in the Book of Leviticus.

That passage may have been in the mind of Texas Gov. Rick Perry last April when he issued a proclamation praying for an end to his state's drought.

"It seems right and fitting that the people of Texas should join together in prayer to humbly seek an end to this devastating drought and these dangerous wildfires," Perry proclaimed, a few months before he entered the GOP presidential contest.

It's natural for humans to look for answers -- theological, climatological or otherwise -- during times of suffering, said Timothy Larsen, a professor of Christian thought at Wheaton College in Illinois.

But Jesus cautioned against inferring God's will in every event, Larsen said. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, Jesus said that 18 people crushed by a falling tower were no worse sinners than anyone else in Jerusalem.

"It is right and good for evangelicals to think that God is in control," Larsen said. "But it is presumptuous to think they know what events mean in God's view. As the prophet (Isaiah) said, his ways are not our ways; his thoughts are not our thoughts."