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The Four Winds

Wind is a vector quantity, meaning that it has both speed and direction. When winds are to be compared or averaged, or statistically analysed, their speeds as well as directions have to be taken into account. This is done by first breaking down the wind vectors into two components. The zonal or east-west component is that part of the wind which flows along the latitude or zone. The meridional or north-south component is that part of the wind which flows along the longitude or meridian. Here, by convention, an east wind or easterly wind means one that is coming in from the east, a north wind means one that is coming in from the north, and so on. Compared to many other meteorological parameters such as pressure or temperature, wind is the one which is most variable, and it can change from one minute to another.

The Bible contains several references to the variability of the wind, its power and its destructive potential. Wind is mentioned in the Bible both as allegorical imagery and as a real natural element. In today's world, the speed and direction of wind can be measured with great precision. But this was not so in Biblical times. Therefore, in the Bible, wind is talked about only with reference to the four basic directions, east, west, north and south. Intermediate directions are rarely mentioned, like for example, the nor'easter storm (northeasterly wind)¹ encountered by Paul in his final voyage.

¹ Acts 27:14

Out of the four winds of the Bible, the east wind is the one which is mentioned most often. By studying the many references to the east wind in the Bible, it can be generally inferred that the east wind was a very strong, hot and dry wind.

In the book of Genesis, for example, we read in three places² about the seven heads of grain that sprouted but then got withered by the scorching east wind. The book of Ezekiel³ tells how the strong and tall vine got uprooted and was completely withered and stripped of its fruit by the dry east wind.

The east wind of the Bible is such a fierce wind⁴ that it can destroy ships on the high seas⁵ and scatter and sweep out people⁶.

The east wind seems to have played a particularly dominant role at two crucial junctures in God's action plan for the deliverance of the Israelites. Pharaoh had stubbornly refused to allow the Israelites out of Egypt and God had to unleash his power to make him do that. God's displeasure with Pharaoh was demonstrated in the form of a series of calamities which were called plagues.

The book of Exodus⁷ describes the ten different plagues that came in succession, each one being more severe than the previous one. The ten plagues came in the following sequence:

² Genesis 41:6, 23, 27

³ Ezekiel 17:10, 19:12

⁴ Isaiah 27:8, Job 38:24

⁵ Psalm 48:7, Ezekiel 27:26

⁶ Job 15:2, 27:21, Jonah 4:8, Jeremiah 18:17

⁷ Exodus 7-11

1. The Plague of Blood
2. The Plague of Frogs
3. The Plague of Gnats
4. The Plague of Flies
5. The Plague on Livestock
6. The Plague of Boils
7. The Plague of Hail
8. The Plague of Locusts
9. The Plague of Darkness
10. The Plague on the Firstborn

The seventh plague, or the plague of hail, was followed the next day by the eighth plague which was the plague of locusts. The sequence of the seventh and eighth plagues was such that the unprecedentedly massive hailstorms had rendered the ground wet. The next morning, God used the east wind to bring in a swarm of locusts, which found in the wet sandy soil a most favourable environment for laying eggs and breeding in huge numbers. Whatever vegetation had survived the impact of the hailstones, was completely devoured by the locusts. To end the plague of locusts, on the following day, God reversed the direction of the wind to a very strong west wind. It caught up the locusts and carried them into the Red Sea, and not a single locust was left anywhere in Egypt.

The second time that God used the strong and dry east wind in a spectacular manner was in the parting of the waters of the Red Sea. God used the strong east wind to drive the sea back, turn it into dry land and divide the waters⁸. The Israelites were able to walk over dry ground and cross the sea safely. When the Egyptians came chasing them from behind, the sea closed up again and blocked their way. It

⁸ Exodus 14:21

was the fierce force of the east wind that made all this possible, something that was never forgotten⁹.

In the book of Hosea, there is a warning for one who *feeds on the wind, pursues the east wind all day, and multiplies lies and violence*.¹⁰ He says: *An east wind from the Lord will come, blowing in from the desert; his spring will fail and his well dry up. His storehouse will be plundered of all its treasures*.¹¹ Hosea speaks of the fruitless deeds of evildoers in these words: *They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind*.¹²

Unlike the east wind which is a distinctly powerful, dry and hot wind, the other winds of the Bible do not seem to have any particular attributes. In fact, the west wind finds a mention in the Bible just once¹³, in connection with the plague of the locusts, in which it was used to send the locusts away from Egypt.

The north wind is said to bring rain¹⁴, and there is an instance of a windstorm coming out of the north, accompanied by brilliant flashes of lightning.¹⁵ The north and south winds appear to go round and round in an unending course.¹⁶ The north and south winds are welcome winds; when they blow on the garden, its fragrance is spread abroad.¹⁷ The south wind could be either hot¹⁸ or gentle.¹⁹

⁹ Psalm 28:26

¹⁰ Hosea 12:1

¹¹ Hosea 13:15

¹² Hosea 8:7

¹³ Exodus 10:19

¹⁴ Proverbs 25:23

¹⁵ Ezekiel 1:4

¹⁶ Ecclesiastes 1:6

¹⁷ Song of Songs 4:16

¹⁸ Luke 12:55

¹⁹ Acts 27:13

The four individual winds blowing from the east, west, north and south directions are described in the Bible in the same way as a human observer would describe even today. We get an idea of the strength of these winds, the weather phenomena associated with them, and their effects. However, the phrases 'four winds', 'four winds of the earth' or 'four winds of heaven' are used in the Bible in a very different manner. The four winds are referred to in the context of extraordinary events or situations as foreseen by prophets, made known to select persons by God in the form of visions, or revealed by Jesus himself to his disciples.

The four winds are sometimes associated with the four corners of the earth or the four quarters of heaven. This should not be considered as being suggestive of an image of a flat earth having four corners, but should be taken to mean the whole earth. Likewise, the four winds should be construed not as winds blowing literally in only four directions, but as winds blowing in all directions. Such an interpretation is indeed justified, because a wind having any speed or direction can be regarded as a combination of two north-south and east-west components.

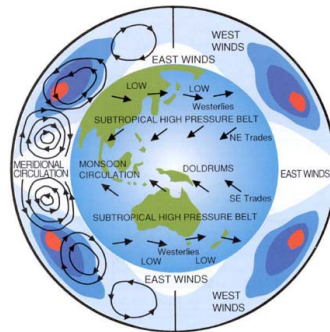
A look at the weather charts used by today's meteorologists would tell that the earth's atmosphere at any given time is made up of high and low pressure areas in different regions. Winds blow out of and around an area of high pressure or anticyclone, and they would randomly scatter whatever that came in their way. On the other hand, over an area of low pressure or cyclone, intense winds would blow around and into it from all directions, and thus gather instead of scatter.

The power of the four winds of the Bible is tremendous, both figuratively and practically. It can churn the great sea,

it can uproot and scatter powerful empires.²⁰ The combined power of the four winds of heaven was to be deployed against the nation of Elam to scatter the people in all directions.²¹

On the contrary, in another situation of a positive nature, the four winds were called upon to gather together and breathe life into the slain so that they may live.²² But of greater significance is the reference to the four winds in the events that would occur when the Son of Man returns in his glory.²³ He will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other, or from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

There is a third kind of role that the four winds will be playing in the last times. John, in his vision, saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.²⁴ This would amount to a circulation pattern of the atmosphere in which there are no highs or lows whatever, or an atmosphere of infinite calm!



²⁰ Daniel 7:2, 8:8, 11:4, Zechariah 2:6

²¹ Jeremiah 49:36

²² Ezekiel 37:9

²³ Matthew 24:31, Mark 13:27

²⁴ Revelation 7:1