

The Theme of Fire in Matthew's Gospel: What is Divine Fire?

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Fire as a Literary Theme: Starting Point	
Fire as Purifying, Light	Fire as Destroying, Darkness
<p>^{3:10} The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.</p>	
<p>^{3:16} After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him, ¹⁷ and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'</p> <p>^{4:16} 'The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.'</p> <p>^{5:14} You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.</p> <p>^{6:22} The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!</p> <p>^{17:1} Six days later Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them; and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as light...⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!'</p> <p>^{25:1} 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the prudent took oil in</p>	<p>^{5:22} Whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.</p> <p>^{8:12} But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p>^{13:40} So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, ⁴² and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p>^{13:49} So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, ⁵⁰ and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p>^{18:8} If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. ⁹ If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.</p> <p>^{22:13} Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.'</p> <p>^{24:50} The master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p>

<p>flasks along with their lamps.⁵ Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep.⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps.⁸ The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'⁹ But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'¹⁰ And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut.¹¹ Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.'¹² But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.'</p> <p>28:1 Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.² And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.³ And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.</p>	<p>25:30 Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</p> <p>25:41 Then he will also say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels...' ⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'</p>
<p>Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.² And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.³ And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them.⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.</p>	

Cultural and Historical Background

- *Fire and Darkness*: 'Fire and darkness' represent staying on the outside of God. Jesus refers to Israel's rejection of God at Mount Sinai. Notice that Moses went up to God's presence on the mountain, *in the fire*. And then, Moses emerged with his face shining (Ex.34), like Jesus in his transfiguration (Mt.17:1 – 3).

^{4:11} You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain *burned with fire* to the very heart of the heavens: *darkness*, cloud and thick gloom... ²⁴ For the LORD your God is a consuming *fire*, a jealous God... ^{5:4} The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, ⁵ while I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the *fire* and did not go up the mountain... ²⁴ You said... ^{4:27} Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do it.' (Dt.4:11 – 5:27)

Jesus appears to be saying that he is the 'new Moses,' (i.e. mediator) (re)making the covenant. So to reject Jesus is to reject God and His desired covenant relationship with humanity.

- *Making Responsible Conclusions from Narratives*: In the Book of Acts, God frees the apostles from prison three times (Acts 5:19 – 20; 12:6; 16:25 – 26). Should we conclude that God *will surely* free us from prison if we are jailed for preaching? Notice there are times where God did *not* free the apostles or other Christians from prison (Acts 8:3; 12:1 – 2; 23:11 – 28:31).

Questions

1. Is fire good or bad for us?
2. So when is fire good for us? Fire seems good when it is received *into* ourselves. We become lamps bearing light from within (5:14 – 16; 25:1 – 12).
 - a. When a lamp is lit, isn't it useful? Helpful to others? Yup – it sheds *light* for those around.
 - b. In fact, isn't there a connection between the Holy Spirit, fire, and *light*? Jesus begins to shine light, when he is transfigured (Mt.17:1 – 3), and we can assume that Jesus after his resurrection continued to shine that way. Because Jesus' baptism, transfiguration, and death and resurrection are all linked up.
 - i. At both his baptism and his transfiguration, Jesus hears his Father say, 'My Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'
 - ii. At his baptism, Jesus went down into the water, and then rose up again. That symbolized his death and resurrection. So all of this is driving towards his death and resurrection. The transfiguration, too.
 - iii. The angel at his tomb shines with light because he is from heaven (Mt.28:3), but the implication is that Jesus made his *humanity* shine with heavenly light.
 - iv. Moses saw God face to face and his face shined with light and glory. But Jesus is God being face to face with us, and his entire human nature shines with light and glory.
 - c. Isn't the Holy Spirit the fire and the light? What does fire do? Consume. It also purifies by consuming what is impure. If the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in his baptism and immediately helped Jesus resist temptation (Mt.4:1 – 11), and therefore purify his human nature all the way to his death and resurrection, then doesn't the Holy Spirit want to purify us, too? By bringing the new humanity of Jesus into us?
3. But how is fire bad for us? When we resist the purification!!
 - a. So if God as fire, or the Holy Spirit as fire, is trying to destroy your sin by burning it away, how will that feel if you want to hold on to your sin? Like God is trying to destroy you!
 - b. Fire is a destroying force from the perspective of the thing it's trying to destroy. But fire is a purifying force from the perspective of the person being purified. That explains why fire is used in both ways here (and actually in every biblical book – you can confirm that).
4. Can you guess what the Day of Pentecost meant on the Jewish feast calendar? What did it commemorate?
 - a. Pentecost commemorates the day the Sinai covenant was made, the day God appeared on top of Mount Sinai to make a covenant with Israel.
 - b. If God appeared in fire at Mount Sinai, what does it mean that God appeared with fire on each disciple in Acts 2? Each believer in Jesus was a mini-Sinai, a mini dwelling place of God. God was marking them as being in the covenant by their faith in Jesus, the mediator of the covenant.
5. What does this mean that the fires of hell are?
 - a. Purifying! At least from God's side. Some people might experience it as destroying, but that's up to us. If you resist God's purifying power, and cling onto your sin, then that might eventually lead to you rejecting Jesus – be careful!! Do we really want Jesus or not?
 - b. Notice my note regarding the Book of Acts. Just because Acts has three stories where God busts the apostles out of prison for preaching Jesus, is that a reason for us to conclude that God will bust us out of prison for preaching? No! Because right there in Acts, there are three other times mentioned where God does not bust apostles out of prison. You have to take both sides of the theme. The theme of fire is the same way, in every biblical book. It has two sides. And we can't just take the side about destruction as if that's the only thing going on.
 - c. So HELL IS THE LOVE OF GOD. Yeah, sure, hell is the wrath of God against the cancer in our bodies, and the addiction in our hearts, so to speak. But hell is the love of God FOR US, FOR OUR PERSONHOOD. Just like the surgeon's wrath burns against the cancer in your body because he LOVE YOU. The counselor's wrath burns against the alcoholism in your heart because he LOVES YOU. The surgeon and the counselor want to destroy the problem WITHIN YOU and see you set FREE. God is a surgeon and counselor. He wants to JUDGE THE SIN IN US AND DESTROY IT, ABSOLUTELY, WITH NO MERCY WHATSOEVER. In fact, God has already judged the sin in Jesus and destroyed it completely! He is the surgeon who became the patient, so He could give His new humanity to everyone. He wants to HEAL EACH AND EVERY PERSON.
6. What about the Book of Revelation? Doesn't the lake of fire mean 'separation' from Jesus?

- a. Well, Revelation says that fire comes in the *presence* of Jesus: ‘Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘...he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and *in the presence of the Lamb.*’ (Rev.14:10)
 - b. What Old Testament reference(s) are contained in the story of the lake of fire? Exodus, where Pharaoh and the army of Egypt are thrown into the Red Sea. So this language is just about Jesus’ victory. It does not indicate that it’s ‘separation’ from Jesus.
 - c. For a thematic analysis of the theme of fire in Revelation, see: <http://nagasawafamily.org/john-revelation-theme-fire.sg.pdf>
7. What about fire away from Jesus’ presence? Doesn’t 2 Thessalonians 1:9 say that? Actually, probably not.
- a. Here are four popular translations:
 - i. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (RSV)
 - ii. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (NRSV)
 - iii. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (NIV)
 - iv. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (ESV)
 - b. But now consider these four translations:
 - i. Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power (KJV)
 - ii. who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might (ASV)
 - iii. who shall suffer justice — destruction age-during — from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of his strength (YLT)
 - iv. who shall incur the justice of eonian extermination from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of His strength (CLNT)
 - c. Here are two renderings based on the Latin Vulgate translation:
 - i. Who shall suffer eternal punishment in destruction, from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of his power (Douay-Rheims)
 - ii. The presence of the Lord, and the majesty of his power, will condemn them to eternal punishment (Ronald Knox)
 - d. Says Father Aidan Kimel:

‘So why the difference in translations? All translations, of course, are interpretations; but the translators of the RSV, NRSV, NIV, and ESV have quite literally introduced an interpretation that goes beyond the Greek. There is no verb in the Greek text that suggests separation or hiding and therefore there is no necessity to read the preposition “from” as “away from.” At very least these “away from” translations must be judged as speculative attempts to bring clarity to a less than clear original text. Tom Talbot elaborates:

‘But in the context of 2 Thessalonians 1:9, we find no relevant verb, such as “to hide” or “to conceal,” no relevant subject of the action, and no other grammatical device that would entitle one to translate apo as “away from.” In the absence of such a device, such a translation makes no more coherent sense in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 than it would in Acts 3:19, where the wording is identical: “Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” Just as the presence of the Lord is the causal source, or that which brought about, refreshing times for the obedient, so the appearance of the Lord “with his mighty angels in flaming fire” (2 Thess 1:7-8) is the causal source of, or that which brings about, the destruction of the disobedient. No other understanding seems to me even remotely plausible. “Destruction away from the glory of his might” simply makes no sense at all in the

context, but “destruction that comes from or has its causal source in “the glory of his might” makes perfectly good sense. (*The Inescapable Love of God*, p. 90)’¹

8. Illus: We can say with T.S. Eliot, in his poem *Four Quartets*:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-
To be redeemed from fire by fire.
Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

9. Illus: This is a good exemplary quote from Ambrose (337 – 394 AD), bishop of Milan, teacher of Augustine of Hippo. Early Christian teachers and leaders regularly spoke this way: ‘And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire. [Isaiah 10:17] So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said. [Deuteronomy 4:24] For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. [Exodus 3:6] The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin. [Matthew 3:11] So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention... What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: “A fire shall burn in His sight.” For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints. (Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170)

¹ Father Aidan Kimel, *Thomas Talbott: The Inescapable Love of God* (Eclectic Orthodoxy blog, Feb 22, 2015) <https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2015/02/22/book-review-the-inescapable-love-of-god-part-5/>