

The Theme of Fire in the Pentateuch

Mako A. Nagasawa

Last modified: July 16, 2018

Fire as a Literary Theme: Starting Point	
Fire as Purifying	Fire as Destroying
<p data-bbox="203 407 1398 558">3:22 Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’ – ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22 – 24)</p> <p data-bbox="203 726 1040 842">15:1 It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram... (Genesis 15:17 – 18)</p> <p data-bbox="203 1062 1040 1213">3:1 Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. (Exodus 3:1 – 2)</p> <p data-bbox="203 1367 1040 1482">13:21 The LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. ²² He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people. (Exodus 13:21 – 22)</p> <p data-bbox="203 1524 1040 1818">19:11 ...for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people... ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the ram’s horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.’ ... ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. ¹⁹ When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. ²⁰ The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. (Exodus 19:11 – 20)</p>	<p data-bbox="1071 779 1406 1052">19:24 Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, ²⁵ and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. (Genesis 19:24 – 25)</p> <p data-bbox="1071 1178 1406 1535">9:23 Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt. ²⁴ So there was hail, and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very severe, such as had not been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. (Exodus 9:23 – 24)</p>

^{24:17} And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the LORD was **like a consuming fire** on the mountain top. ¹⁸ Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. (Exodus 24:17 – 18)

^{25:8} Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. ⁹ According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it. (Exodus 25:8 – 9)

^{29:14} But the flesh of the bull and its hide and its refuse, you shall burn with **fire** outside the camp; it is a sin offering... ¹⁸ You shall offer up in smoke the whole ram on the altar; it is a burnt offering to the LORD: it is a soothing aroma, an offering by **fire** to the LORD... ²⁵ You shall take them from their hands, and offer them up in smoke on the altar on the burnt offering for a soothing aroma before the LORD; it is an offering by **fire** to the LORD... ³⁷ For seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it; then the altar shall be most holy, and whatever touches the altar shall be holy. (Exodus 29:14 – 37)

^{34:29} It came about when Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moses' hand as he was coming down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him. ³⁰ So when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. (Exodus 34:29 – 30)

^{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. ¹² Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the **fire**; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form--only a voice. ¹³ So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. ¹⁴ The LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might perform them in the land where you are going over to possess it. ¹⁵ So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the **fire**... ²⁴ For the LORD your God is a **consuming fire**, a jealous God... ³⁶ Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His **great fire**, and you heard His words from the midst of the **fire**. (Deuteronomy 4:11 – 36)

^{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... ²² These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain from the midst of the **fire**, of the cloud and of the thick gloom, with a great voice, and He added no more. He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. ²³ And when you heard the voice from

^{11:1} Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD; and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled, and the **fire** of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. ² The people therefore cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD and the fire died out. ³ So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the **fire** of the LORD burned among them. (Numbers 11:1 – 3)... ^{16:35} **Fire** also came forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense. (Numbers 16:35)

^{7:25} The graven images of their gods you are to burn with **fire**; you shall not covet the silver or

<p>the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. ²⁴ You said, ‘Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives. ²⁵ Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, then we will die. ²⁶ For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? (Deuteronomy 5:4 – 26)</p> <p>^{9:15} So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. (Deuteronomy 9:15)</p> <p>^{32:22} For a fire is kindled in My anger, And burns to the lowest part of Sheol, And consumes the earth with its yield, And sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.</p> <p>²³ I will heap misfortunes on them; I will use My arrows on them.</p> <p>²⁴ They will be wasted by famine, And consumed by plague and bitter destruction; And the teeth of beasts I will send upon them, With the venom of crawling things of the dust...</p> <p>³⁶ For the LORD will vindicate His people, And will have compassion on His servants, When He sees that their strength is gone, And there is none remaining, bond or free. (Deuteronomy 32:22 – 24, 36)</p>	<p>the gold that is on them, nor take it for yourselves, or you will be snared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 7:25)</p> <p>^{9:21} I took your sinful thing, the calf which you had made, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it very small until it was as fine as dust; and I threw its dust into the brook that came down from the mountain. (Deuteronomy 9:21)</p> <p>^{13:16} Then you shall gather all its booty into the middle of its open square and burn the city and all its booty with fire as a whole burnt offering to the LORD your God; and it shall be a ruin forever. It shall never be rebuilt. (Deuteronomy 13:16)</p>
---	---

Historical and Cultural Background

- *God on a Mountain*: Eden was a mountain, as evidenced by the four rivers which diverged from it (Gen.2:10) and by Ezekiel saying so (Ezk.28:13 – 14). Humanity was to meet God on that mountain. Hence Sinai was a mountain in the archetype of Eden (Ex.19). Israel was supposed to go up. But they were afraid, and only Moses went all the way up into God’s presence as their covenant representative. As a result of passing through the fire, Moses was purified in some sense by God, and his face shone (Ex.33).
- *Tabernacle*: Was a horizontal representation of the vertical distances on Mt. Sinai.
 - Outer Court: Israel at the base of Mount Sinai (Ex.19)
 - Bronze altar: offer a lamb for a burnt offering sacrifice, become holy (29:37)
 - Bronze laver: wash with water (cleansing)
 - Holy Place: The elders part way up Mount Sinai, where they saw God (Ex.24:1)
 - Lampstand (God’s fire and light on the mountain)
 - Table with bread (God provided food for Moses and elders)
 - Altar of incense (prayers)
 - Holy of Holies: The top of the mountain, where Moses met with God for forty days (Ex.24:12)
 - Ark of the covenant (contains tablets of the broken covenant)
 - Mercy seat (place of atonement)
- *Moses’ Face Shining*: Moses passed through the divine fire, saw God, and spoke with Him. Apparently this experience purified him to some degree, and his face shone with divine light (Ex.34:29 – 30). Since the sanctuary became a horizontal model of the vertical mountain Moses ascended, the process of approaching God in the sanctuary reflects purification, by water and fire.

Questions

1. How was the Tabernacle patterned after Mount Sinai? Discuss.
2. Why would this moment at Mt. Sinai need to be not just remembered but re-enacted?
 - a. Aaron and future high priests re-enact Moses' meeting with God to re-establish the covenant
 - b. The high priest sending the sin of Israel into God (Lev.16)
3. Why is God described as a consuming fire (Ex.24:17; Dt.4:24)?
 - a. He did 'consume' Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19) and offerings and, poetically, 'the earth with its yield (Dt.32:22).
 - b. But he also consumes impurity and unholiness. The bronze altar was a holy purifier. Notice that the altar contained a fire. It was the only thing that made something holy by touch (Ex.29:37), rather than becoming unholy or common or contaminated. The bronze altar was in the Holy Place. It seemed to represent the fire of God's presence through which Moses passed.
4. How might that tie back to the flaming sword guarding the way back to Eden?
 - a. Something needs to be burned away or cut away from us in order for us to return to the tree of life: the corruption of sin
 - b. Jesus burned and cut away the corruption of sin from his own humanity. He purified it. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus plays the role of the priest, sacrifice, and the sanctuary itself. He carries the burden of sinful humanity (Rom.8:3) to die in God's presence, so that God could offer back his purified life to others.
 - c. Illus: leader illustrate this purification with a personal story
5. 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;
6. For more information and points, see:
 - a. The Theme of Fire in Matthew's Gospel: <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness.sg.pdf>
 - b. The Theme of Fire in Revelation: <http://nagasawafamily.org/john-revelation-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

Sinai as Israel's Resistance to God's Covenant Invitation

Does the Pentateuch itself describe the Sinai incident as covenant refusal? Yes. In the curious burning bush episode (Ex.3:2), the fiery presence of God did not consume – that is, destroy – the bush. The burning bush seems to represent the outcome God desired from His coming encounter with Israel at Mount Sinai. After delivering Israel from Egypt and leading them to the same mountain, God descended upon it in fire and smoke (Ex.19:16 – 18). He called all Israel, not just Moses, to come up onto the mountain when the trumpet sounded to meet with Him face to face (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5). The symbolism was reassurance to Moses that God's refining presence would not burn

away Israel completely. Furthermore, if the bush – later described by Luke as a *thorn* bush (Acts 7:30) – was meant to remind Moses, Israel, and later readers of the creation suffering from the curse of humanity’s sin by virtue of its *thorns* (Gen.3:17 – 19), then the connection between the fiery presence in the bush and the fiery presence among the Israelites becomes even stronger. God would have begun dwelling among His people Israel, among His fallen creation, as He had dwelled within the thorn bush.

But Israel declined to come up onto Mount Sinai, instead staying at a distance (Ex.19:19 – 20). In his book, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, John Sailhamer argues convincingly that the Tabernacle, priesthood, and various laws were the result of Israel’s sinful failure to meet God face to face on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. The former is found when Israel camped at the base of the mountain, Moses ascended the mountain to meet with God, and God announced His intention to form a covenant with Israel: ‘Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Ex.19:5 – 6). After heartily resolving to do whatever God said to do, Israel received the word from God that they were to meet him ‘on the mountain’ on the third day. ‘When the ram’s horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up *on* the mountain’ (Ex.19:13). Moses’ recollection of the Sinai encounter to the second generation of Israelites come out of Egypt reflects this understanding: ‘The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, 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*’ (Dt.5:4 – 5). Sailhamer acknowledges that English translations of that verse do not always reflect this thought of coming up ‘on the mountain.’ But the same view is offered by Exodus 3:12, ‘you shall worship God *on* this mountain.’ Thus does the New Jewish Publication Society translate the verse. Sailhamer gives a thorough explanation and discussion of this.¹ As Sailhamer observes, from Exodus 19, God first referred to Israel as a kingdom *of* priests, and then shifts His language in the course of the narrative to referring to Israel as a kingdom *with* priests.

Sailhamer’s thesis is that the Pentateuch is really narrating Israel’s covenant refusal, and Moses’ subsequent mediation. That thesis is substantiated by the story of the Pentateuch itself. With whom does God make the covenant? Moses. As a result of Israel’s initial refusal of the covenant invitation, God chose Moses to mediate the covenant and represent the rest of Israel. This resulted in God giving laws in Exodus 20:1 – 27, and Israel trembling in fear again in Exodus 20:18 – 20. God responds by giving more laws in Exodus 20:21 – 23:19. The covenant appears to be stabilized momentarily when Moses, Aaron, and seventy elders ascend the mountain and eat with God in Exodus 23:20 – 24:11. God gives Moses the Tabernacle instructions in Exodus 24:12 – 31:11. But Israel breaks the covenant again, with Aaron’s personal participation, in the golden calf incident in Exodus 32:1 – 8. God wanted to start a people with Moses, but Moses pleads with God not to do that (Ex.32:9 – 14). Then we reach the central point of the Pentateuch as a whole: Moses’ personal mediation for Israel to restore the covenant, in Exodus 32:30 – 33:23. Henceforth, Moses includes his fellow Israelites with him, but God clearly makes His covenant with Moses. God promises His presence with Moses individually, but Moses asks God to be present with ‘us,’ that is, Israel as a whole (Ex.33:14 – 16). After Moses cuts the second set of stone tablets to replace the first set, and meets with God face to face, God says, ‘In accordance with these words I have made a covenant with *you* and with Israel’ (Ex.34:27). The story turns around this chiasmic center as follows:²

The Purpose of Divine ‘Fire’ in the Pentateuch

This brings us to the use of ‘fire’ and ‘darkness’ as an indication of Israel’s covenant refusal. I believe the best explanation of Jesus’ usage of ‘fire’ and ‘outer darkness’ as motifs of hell (Mt.5:22; 8:12; 13:40 – 42, 49 – 50; 22:13; 25:30) is that he was drawing from Israel’s failure at Sinai. Israel failed to respond to God’s invitation to come higher up and further in, seeing only ‘fire’ (Dt.4:11, 12, 15, 24, 33, 36; 5:4, 5, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26) and ‘darkness’ of smoke (Dt.4:11; 5:23). To my knowledge, this is the only place in Scripture where ‘fire’ and ‘darkness’ are used in reference to the same event. Arguably, Jesus understood Israel’s decision to see God as only fire and darkness, and to remain outside God, as covenant refusal, a refusal to enter more deeply *into God*.

Fire in the Pentateuch represents the refining and consuming power of God personally speaking His commands to a human audience. It demonstrates that God, when He personally spoke His commands to people, was cleansing their

¹ John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p.51 – 59

² For this literary analysis, I am indebted to Sailhamer and a Jewish scholar whose work I have, sadly, misplaced.

sin out of them, burning up the impurity, at least to some degree. Deuteronomy contains at least three places where this idea is put into poetic, parallel form: two in the narrative prologue of Moses (Dt.1 – 11), and the third in the midst of the instruction for how to receive the prophet who will take up Moses' prophetic office (Dt.18:15 – 22):

4:36 Out of the heavens He let you *hear His voice to discipline you*;
and on earth He let you *see His great fire* (Dt.4:36)

5:25 Now then why should we die?
For this *great fire* will consume us;
If we hear the *voice of the LORD our God* any longer,
then we will die.

18:16 This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God
In Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying,
'Let me not *hear again the voice* of the LORD my God,
let me not *see this great fire* anymore, or I will die.' (Dt.18:16)

In each of these poetic parallels, hearing the voice of God is compared to seeing the fire of God. Both caused the Israelites to fear for their lives. This condensed account of Deuteronomy 4 – 5 shows this connection repeatedly:

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. ¹² Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the *fire*; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form--only a voice. ¹³ So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone... ¹⁵ you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the *fire*... ²⁴ For the LORD your God is a consuming *fire*, a jealous God... ³³ Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the *fire*, as you have heard it, and survived?... ³⁶ Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire... ^{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... ²² These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain from the midst of the *fire*, of the cloud and of the thick gloom, with a great voice, and He added no more. He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. ²³ And when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was *burning with fire*, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. ²⁴ You said, 'Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the *fire*; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives. ²⁵ Now then why should we die? For this *great fire* will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, then we will die. ²⁶ For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the *fire*, as we have, and lived? 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)

The Israelites at Sinai/Horeb were ostensibly correct in fearing they would die if God directly addressed them from heaven, just as they might have been consumed by the great fire of God on earth. Hence, God accepted Israel's request to let Moses remain as the mediator of God's commands and God's presence. Apparently, the phrase, 'The LORD spoke to you [Israel] *face to face* at the mountain from the midst of the fire' (5:4), is not meant to be interpreted as being without Moses' mediation, i.e. 'while I was standing between the LORD and you' (5:5). For the phrase 'face to face' is highly unusual. In the Pentateuch, the phrase was used only sparingly, and only in relation to God. Jacob wrestled with God and saw God 'face to face' (Gen.32:30), resulting in God crippling Jacob's sin; God made Jacob unable to run away from his problems henceforth. Moses and Joshua saw God 'face to face' when God met them in the tent of meeting (Ex.33:11). Moses seemed to have a further, uniquely intimate encounter with God at the top of Mount Sinai (Ex.34:5 – 8) and at various times afterwards so that his face shone (Ex.34:32 – 35). The Pentateuch says of him, 'Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face' (Dt.34:10). Thus, God spoke 'face to face' to Israel in and through Moses the mediator, but not in the sense that God spoke 'face to face' to Israel without him. The face of God shone through the shining face of Moses.

Moses' role of covenant mediator is vital to understanding the Pentateuch, Jesus' subsequent reading of the Pentateuch, and the Gospel writers' engagement with it. Given the prior decision of Israel to reject the covenant offered to them at Sinai, and also the idolatry that involved even Aaron (Ex.32:1 – 8), Moses offered himself on behalf of the Israelites as God's covenant partner and the mediator between God and Israel. God would have started over with Moses, but Moses pleaded with God to not cast off the people. He would both receive words from God and repeat them for Israel.

^{5:28} The LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me, 'I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They have done well in all that they have spoken. ²⁹ Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever! ³⁰ Go, say to them, 'Return to your tents.' ³¹ But as for you, stand here by Me, that I may speak to you all the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which you shall teach them, that they may observe them in the land which I give them to possess.' (Dt.5:28 – 31)

Something not mentioned in the Exodus narrative itself is Moses' recollection of traversing the mountain while it was burning with divine fire. Notably, because of the divine encounter on the top of Sinai (Ex.34), Moses was apparently able to enter into the fire of God and walk through it:

^{9:15} So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. (Dt.9:15)

What was this fire? Why was Moses able to walk through it? Was this divine 'fire' something other than a typical earthly fire, combusting the mountain and whatever shrubbery was on it? Or did God give Moses special protection from ordinary fire? Or, perhaps more interestingly, perhaps Moses entering into the fire on the mountain symbolized the reverse? The fiery and consuming and covenantal word of God was able to enter into Moses. The prophet Isaiah experienced something of that nature when an angel touched a burning coal to his unclean lips. Moses was able to bear in himself the covenant partnership for which God had called. God's fiery word dwelled within Moses as it had done in the fire of the burning bush. What Moses told Israel to put on their hearts, bind as signs on their hands and foreheads, and write on their doorposts and gates (Dt.6:4 – 9) were reminders: They were to let God's commands enter into every internal space of their heart, mind (forehead), and strength (hand), if that is indeed an acceptable way to speak of such things. Something of this sort had happened to Moses.

Fire at Sinai/Horeb is therefore both God's purification of humanity and human fear of being purified. Israel's fear and resistance to go up Mount Sinai/Horeb to meet with God represented their unwillingness to be cleansed and truly receive the word of God. After Israel declined God's invitation to come up on the mountain, God had lamented to Moses, knowing that the human hearts of the Israelites had not yet been changed, 'Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!' (Dt.5:29) Purification by fire and circumcision of heart (Dt.30:6) therefore converge as mutually interpreting symbols pointing to the same reality: the removal of the corruption of sin from human nature by the word of God, and specifically the Word of God made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Since fire symbolized God's love also (Song 8:5), the prophets likened the hoped-for messianic work of God as a purifying fire burning away Israel's impurities (e.g. Isa.29:6; 30:27 – 30; Mal.3:2 – 3).

I must mention a caveat. Fire and brimstone raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19) indeed is an earlier incident of fire, but I believe that episode must be grouped in with the flood of Noah (Gen.6 – 9), the taking of the Egyptian firstborn (Ex.12), and the conquest of the Canaanites (Josh.6ff.). Incidents when God took human life in the Old Testament must be coordinated with Jesus' appearance to the dead (1 Pet.3:18 – 20; 4:6). God's rationale for taking human life seems to be His need to protect His chosen people lest the line of faith be killed and the Son of God be prevented from taking flesh from within the Jewish covenant family. But as Jesus' self-presentation to those who died before him suggests, God did not simply consign those people to hell. Rather, God gave them a chance to see and hear Jesus and presumably consider that he offers them the solution to the problem of their corrupted human nature. Given that much, Sodom and Gomorrah demonstrate an open hostility to the same angelic visitors that came to Abraham and Sarah (Gen.18), as well as to Lot who showed them hospitality. For the chosen family to continue receiving human outsiders and even heavenly visitors (hospitality was a pre-eminent godly value) means that the hostility of Sodom and Gomorrah had to be removed, lest Israel's existence be jeopardized in the land. As such, the

rain of fire seems more like volcanic material and not the same fire of the burning bush or Sinai. Nevertheless, that fire also seems to serve the purpose of purifying the land from the corruption of those particular Canaanite tribes, and in their case, leading them straight to the purification of their human nature offered by Jesus.

I also find it likely that this covenant refusal at Sinai is also an origination point of the literary motif that the word of God, and later, the word from Jesus' mouth, is a sharp, two-edged sword (e.g. Heb.4:12; Rev.1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21; although see also Gen.3:24). Jesus said later in parables that the destiny of a rebellious person is to be hewn down with a sword: 'The master...will cut him in pieces' (Mt.24:50 – 51; Lk.12:46; 19:27). Jesus was referring to hell because of the similarity between these statements with others involving 'fire' and 'outer darkness.' The word of God is also a fire which seeks to destroy what can be burned away, and seeks to refine what can be purified. Thus, God's word is also a sword which threatens human sinful existence as it currently is, since it is seeking to put something to death. I am sure that is the only adequate explanation of Jesus' 'cut him in pieces' sayings.