

FIRE OF GOD IN THE BIBLE

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The topic of the *Fire of God* was central in one of the IBC sermons, delivered by our pastor Roger Roberts in spring 2011. In this sermon he asked us to take off our shoes, because we were all standing on God's Holy Ground, as Moses had stood before the burning bush. In the same sermon we were also told about Pascal's vision of the *Fire of God*. Though I failed to take my shoes off, the sermon nevertheless had a deep impression on me. Later on I heard from my friend, a Russian iconographer A. M. Lidov (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksey_Lidov), about a symposium entitled "Fire and Light in the Sacral Space", which he was planning to organize. I saw in this the hand of Providence directing me to write on this topic. The topic of the *Fire of God* really took hold of me and would not let me go until the paper was finished. I published it in Russian in the proceedings of the above-mentioned symposium, which took place in September 2011. I was happy and proud to contribute a paper with a Bible-based approach to a collection of scientific work. What I present here is an English version of this paper. I have somewhat modified the text both to fit some extra material I have discovered as my understanding of the subject has evolved, and to address it to a different audience.

When I started to work on this topic, my first and a fairly easy discovery was that fire as such (i.e. as a natural phenomenon or used for human needs) is of little interest to Biblical writers. Multiple and diverse occurrences of the theme of fire in the Bible can be very well united under an umbrella-concept of fire as a servant of God. A more detailed classification of fire-related episodes in the Bible showed that the theme of Heavenly fire, or *the Fire of God*, dominates in the text. The *Fire of God* is not only an important form of God's interaction with the human mind, but also a manifestation of His Power and Glory, an expression of His wrath and His reaction to sin. The *Fire of God* is timeless. It may be experienced by today's Christians just as clearly and powerfully as it was experienced in Biblical times. The *Fire of God* is a spiritual reality. A proper understanding of it helps us to better know God, to work out our relationship with Him, and to struggle with sin in our lives.

INTRODUCTION

Humankind enjoys a deep and multifaceted relationship with fire, the most enigmatic of the four elements. Fire behaves almost like a living creature: it is born, it lives and dies; it must be fed and it proliferates. Fire is an extremely rare phenomenon in the wild - it essentially belongs to the human world. The functions of fire are versatile and contradictory: it can destroy and create; it can melt and solidify; it can both sustain life and take it away. The psychology of our relation to fire is also ambiguous¹. Fire is both attractive and frightful. It brings about both pleasures and prohibitions. It is mundane and mysterious at the same time. It mesmerizes the observer and engenders a special feeling, which has an aspect of awe. This feeling is somewhat similar to what we experience with respect to the Divine. The existence of the deep connection between fire and the Divine is explicitly expressed in early religions (Zoroastrianism), as well as in ancient Greek philosophy (Empedocles, Heraclitus).

According to the theological dictionary², the word *fire* occurs in the Bible no less than 400 times, and it almost always appears in direct connection with a religious context. We see fire in many key episodes in the Bible, where it indicates God's presence and does His will. In the book of Genesis, for example, we find the flaming sword that forbids Adam to re-enter the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:24). A moving firepot with a blazing torch appears at the moment of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:17). In Exodus, we hear God's voice issuing from the burning bush, calling Moses to his future mission (Ex. 3:3-4). As Moses receives the stone tablets on the mount Sinai, the mountain is enveloped in flames (Ex. 19:18). A pillar of fire guides the Israelites during their journey in the desert (Ex. 13:12,22). God instructs the priests how to use fire for sacrifices (Lev. 1-4). Elijah is taken to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). The tongues of fire appear above the heads of the apostles when they receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3). The fire is used by God as a weapon, both to destroy and to protect. Eternal fire awaits sinners. The various aspects and themes of fire, which we find in these examples, can be united together by a well-known Biblical phrase: "He makes ... flames of fire His servants" (Ps. 104:4; Heb. 1:7).

The connection of fire with the Divine can be seen in the visions of the prophets and mystics. The throne of the Ancient of Days in Daniel's visions is flaming with fire, and a river of fire flows in front of it (Dan. 7:9-10). Ezekiel sees the Son of Man in flame from his waist down (Ez. 8:2). John sees His blazing eyes (Rev. 1:14). Blaise Pascal, both a man of science and a mystic, begins his *Memorial* (viz. a description of his mysterious encounter with God on the night of November 23, 1654) with an enigmatic header: "FIRE" and then goes on: "GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob ..." Unlike Biblical prophets, his experience was not expressed in visible images; fire is the only sensuous object mentioned in the short text of the *Memorial*, which was found on him post mortem³.

Our attitude towards fire is ambivalent. We tend to divide different kinds of fire into 'good' and 'bad'. While the flame in a stove or a hearth keeps us warm, a forest fire destroys and kills. In a similar way, fire in the Bible also seems to be ambivalent: while on the one hand it devours and punishes, it is also the source of blessing and purification. We believe both in a terrible fire in Hell and in the shining fire of Faith. What is the source of this ambiguity? Is fire itself an intrinsically two-sided phenomenon or this apparent duality is due to the different ways we look at it and experience it? Perhaps, the latter is correct. There is one *Fire of God*, which follows the will of the Lord. It distinguishes Good from Evil. It burns out sin but spares and purifies the righteous. It attracts believers, but is frightful for the enemies of the Lord. In either case, it is still one and the same *Fire of God*, much in the same way as the flame in a stove and the fires consuming an entire forest are physically identical.

The various forms in which fire appears in the Bible, that seem at first to be different or even contradictory, are in fact closely connected. The fire of the burning bush, the fire which burns the straw in the book of Isaiah, the fire blazing in the flaming lake of the book of Revelation, the tongues of the Pentecostal fire - are they not all occurrences of the same *Fire of God*? This fire burns what must be burnt and spares those who are set apart to live. In the vast majority of Biblical episodes in which fire plays a role, it acts as an executor of God's will both in a positive and in a negative sense. In many cases, the functions of punishment and blessing cannot be easily separated. The self-ignited fire, which burnt the sacrifice of Elijah, brought destruction to the prophets of Baal. (1 Kings 18:38). The wall of fire,

which protected Israel, also devoured its enemies (Zech. 2:5). The fire of the Judgment Day is fearful, but it scares only sinners.

Similarly to God Himself, fire causes a mixed feeling of love and fear, but remains the same in essence.

SACRIFICIAL FIRE

In the Old Testament, fire sacrifices are the main channel of communication of man with God. The first significant episode in the Bible after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden is found in the story of Abel and Cain, which begins with their offerings to God. Fire sacrifices are mentioned in the Old Testament earlier and more frequently than prayers. They also play a central role in the liturgical rituals described in the book of Leviticus. The Old Testament sacrifices could only be made with the use of fire (Ex. 12:8-11; Lev. 1-4). Other modes of sacrifices are not even mentioned. In most of the sacrificial rituals only certain parts of the offering were burnt, while in so-called 'burnt offerings' (*holocaust* in Greek) the entire offering was given to fire. In these sacrifices the fire acted as a representative of God taking the offering on His behalf. The blazing flames would devour the offering, transferring it from the realm of the visible to the domain of the Divine. By destroying the existence of the sacrifice in this world, the fire was committing it to God, who would receive it in His world. Because the ancients placed God in a physical heaven, the pillar of smoke rising to the skies bore witness to the acceptance of the sacrifice.

The central meaning of sacrifices in the Old Testament was the atonement of sins (Lev. 1:4). The function of the sacrificial fire as a cleansing tool becomes clear if we accept, with most theologians, the concept of "substitutionary atonement", or of a "transfer of sin"⁴. According to this concept, the transgression of a man offering the sacrifice, was transferred onto the offering and destroyed together with it. The offering of the sacrifice held a much deeper meaning than the simple paying of a fine to buy forgiveness. When taking an animal to the altar, an Israelite would lay his hands on its head transferring his sin onto it (Lev. 1:4), and then he would kill it punishing it in place of himself. The sacrificial fire would burn not only the offering, but also the sin transferred onto it. As we shall see later on, the burning of sin is in general the main function of fire in the Bible.

In some special cases, sacrificial fires ignited miraculously. This was meant to demonstrate both the significance of the events as well as the chosen-ness of those who were offering sacrifices. At the establishment of the priesthood during the first liturgy at the Tabernacle, fire was ignited after Moses and Aaron blessed the people (Lev. 9:24). In the beginning of Gideon's ministry, an angel touched meat and unleavened bread with the tip of his staff, and the fire flared from the rock, on which the offering was placed (Judges 6:21). David called on the Lord and the Lord "answered him with fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offering" (1 Chron. 21:26). During the ceremony of the consecration of the first Temple, "when Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple" (2 Chron. 7:1-3). Elijah was sure that God would prove his faith true by igniting the fire (1 Kings 18:24), and this is in fact what happened: "The fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil" (1 Kings 18:38-40). This fire was no ordinary one, for a usual fire would not burn stones.

The acts of God's will manifesting itself in the miraculous self-ignitions of fire, could be interpreted from the standpoint of the light/fire dialectic. Light is an ideal fire, an element of God Himself. As a focused beam of light, being itself invisible, can ignite a paper, so the uncreated Divine Light would materialize as fire at certain places, on which His will is focused. The non-material Divine light engenders fire when it collides with the material. The fire, in its turn, becomes a source of light, remindful of the Light that created it.

THE FIRE AS A WEAPON OF DESTRUCTION

On many occasions, fire in the Bible would ignite from the sparks of God's wrath and destroy the sin. It destroys the iniquity and protects the righteous. The Lord burns the fallen cities of Sodom and Gomorrah with the fire "out of the heavens" (Gen. 19:24), and He strikes the Egyptians with fire and hail (Ex. 9:23,24). He punishes the sons of Aaron for the use of non-authorized flames in the service (Lev. 10:2; Num. 3:4). Fire consumes ungrateful Israelites during the journey in the desert (Num. 11:1,2) as well as 250 men who rebelled against Moses (Num. 16:35). Elijah calls down fire from heaven, which devours two units of fifty soldiers dispatched to arrest him (2 Kings. 1:10-12). The apostles suggest to Jesus to do the same and destroy the Samaritans who rejected Him (Luke, 9:54-56).

The image of fire is allegorically used to express the power of God's anger. The wrath of God is often compared to fire (Deut. 32:22, Ps. 79:5, 89:46, 18:8; Nahum 1:6, Soph. 1:8, 2:1). The Divinely inspired word of prophet Jeremiah would consume the wicked as fire consumes wood (Jer. 23:29). The Lord Himself is compared to "a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29).

Fire helps the Lord's Army and smites His enemies. The servant of Elisha sees chariots of fire coming to rescue Israelites besieged in Dothan (2 Kings 6:17). The image of chariots of fire appears also in the book of Nahum (Nahum 2:3,4). The Lord Himself would stand as a wall of fire around Jerusalem to ensure its protection (Zech. 2:5). Before the conquest of Canaan, Moses promises to Israel, that "the Lord your God goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire" to annihilate the enemies (Deut. 9:3). A fiery punishment awaits Nineveh (Nahum 2:13, 3:15), the Samaritans (Mich. 1:7) as well as other hostile nations (Amos 1,2). Israel itself, faithful in doing the will of God, becomes a fire consuming the Edomites (Obad. 1:18, Zech. 12:26).

On the Day of Judgment, the *Fire of God* executes God's will. Isaiah prophesies that "the Name of the Lord comes from afar, with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire" (Isa. 30:27). Fiery punishment awaits the lawless of Israel (Isa. 33: 11-14). Isaiah and Malachi call out for God's judgment upon the wicked using the image of fire, which consumes the straw and dry grass (Is. 5:24) or stubble (Mal. 4:1). John the Baptist uses a similar allegory, when he calls Israel to repentance: the wheat, he said, shall be separated and gathered, while the chaff shall be burnt up (Matt. 3:12). Jesus refers to the fires of hell (Matt. 5:22, 18:8-9), or the "eternal fire" (Matt. 25:41, Mark 9:41-48) that await sinners. On the day of the Lord, the fire will destroy "the earth and everything in it" (2 Pet. 3:10-12; Soph. 3:8).

Jesus says that he “has come to bring fire on the earth” (Luke. 12:49). Does He mean here the fires of the Judgment Day or is He prophesying the graceful fire of the Pentecost? John sees “the sea of glass mixed with fire” in his apocalyptic vision (Rev. 15:2). The fire from heaven devours the nations deceived by the Satan (Rev. 20:9). The Satan himself will be “thrown into the lake of burning sulphur” (Rev. 20:10) together with those “whose names are not found in the book of life” (Rev. 20:15). Moreover, Death and Hades will also be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14).

The image of the fires of hell is one of the most common and widely spread images in all of Christendom. Hagiographic literature is full of fiery, hellish nightmares in which monks suffered from acute awareness of their own sinfulness. Were their fears exaggerated? It seems to us that they were simply making up, or imagining, the fire on which they would burn. But the theme of fire being self-ignited by sinners is, in fact, quite Biblical: in the book of Isaiah the wicked perish in the fire, which they make themselves (Is. 50:11). Here, the punishing fire is ignited not so much by God’s decision, but rather appears as a natural reaction to sin. In the book of Isaiah, the punishing fire appears both as an image of the self-destruction of sin (Is. 9:18, 65:5) as well as of a direct manifestation of God’s wrath (Is. 9:19).

The Bible never depicts Satan as the master of hell or as the stoker of its fire. On the contrary, the same eternal fire awaits non-repentant transgressors as well as the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41). The dialectics of fire and light may help to understand the origin of the fires of hell: the Light of God fills the world after the second coming, but engenders fire, when it collides with sin. The Divine Light, ideal in itself, ignites destructive physical fire in its interaction with the sinful world. The beams of this same Light, falling on sinful souls, ignite the fires of hell. The fires of hell are thus a reaction of sinful substance on the action of the Divine Light. It is a sensuous expression of the sufferings of a sinner in God’s Light. It is in this sense, as we see, that the sinner ignites his own fire.

In the same way, we can understand why, in the Bible, the vicious passions are likened to burning fire (Os. 7:4-6; 1Cor. 7:9; Prov. 30:16). The flame of sinful passions is a foretaste of the fires of hell. Non-repentant sinners, planning evil against Israel, are compared with “smoldering stubs of firewood” (Is. 7:4). A similar image is used to characterize the sinners who are saved: they are compared to “burning sticks snatched from the fire” (Amos 4:11; Zekh. 3:2; Jude 1:23). Sin is a fire ignited from hell (James 3:6). A sinner walks on hot coals (Prov. 6:28). It is also not a coincidence that we find three Gospels showing Peter near the flame of a fire at the moment of his denial of Jesus (Matt. 14:67; Luke 22:54-56; John 18:18,25). A sinful tongue speaking lies is compared to a spark, which ignites a great fire (James 3:5-6). When a righteous man does good to his enemy, he “heaps burning coals on his head”, thus delivering him to the judgment of God (Prov. 25:22; Rom. 12:20). Considering all of these examples, it becomes clear that the link between fire and God does not contradict the link ‘fire – sin’, for what the fire of God’s judgment signifies is not simply the nature of God but rather his reaction to sin. It is thus caused by sin rather than by God.

We also find in the Bible, that fire was used by people as a tool to execute and destroy. Execution by burning is prescribed as an appropriate form of death penalty for some sexual sins (Lev. 20:14, 21:9). Israelites burnt the bodies of Achan and his family, who had been executed for the theft of the “devoted things” (Joshua 7:10-26). Moses burnt the golden calf in fire (Deut. 9:21). It is not a coincidence that this

very form of execution was used at the times of the inquisition. The burning at the stake was a sign, more explicit than in other forms of execution, of a divine punishment yet to come.

THE TEST OF FIRE AND THE THEME OF IMMORTALITY

The fire of God devours those living in iniquity, but spares the righteous, appearing before them as a blessed fire, the fire of God's Grace. When Moses received the Decalogue, the Israelites standing at the foot of the mount Sinai observed the Glory of God on the mountain as a fearful devouring fire (Exod. 24:17). Moses would later tell that the mountain was ablaze with fire (Deut. 9:15). In this pivotal event of the Bible, the devouring fire on the mountain threatened the people, who were forbidden to approach the mountain, but posed no threat to Moses. Moses stood his 'test of fire'. Perhaps he was prepared for this test by his unforgettable experience of the burning bush?

Moses was not the only one to withstand the 'test of fire'. For in a similar way we see that fire did no harm to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three righteous men of Israel who were thrown into a blazing furnace by the order of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3). The three Israelites were sure beforehand that the flames would not hurt them. God also promised to Isaiah that His fire would not burn Israel (Is. 43:2). And the flames over the heads of the apostles on the day of Pentecost did not burn them (Acts 2:3).

The burning bush, which "was on fire but did not burn up" (Ex. 3:1) teaches us that holy matter cannot be consumed or corrupted or, in short, that it is imperishable. What we find here has more to do with a sort of a special, 'fire-proof' substance than with a special sort of fire. The burning bush is thus an example of such holy substance, and it also provides for us a foretaste of eternal life. The same fire devours what is to be destroyed and spares what is intended for immortality. Everyone shall be 'treated' with fire (Mk. 9:49), but not everyone will be able to withstand this 'treatment'. Similarly, the *Fire of God* tests the work of the teachers of faith, verifying the strength and quality of the result of their labor, namely the souls of new Christians (1Cor. 3:13-15). If in the Bible fire is often presented as a means of testing the purity of gold, this is because faith itself should be purer and stronger than gold, i.e. it must stand the test of fire (1Pet. 1:7, comp. Rev. 3:18). The capacity of Christians and their faith to stand this test is related to the imperishability of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which believers receive, and, in the last analysis, to immortality. Apostle Peter compares the suffering of believers with the fiery test and calls them not to escape from it (1 Pet. 4:12).

Origen, one of the earliest Christian theologians, wrote that the Divine Fire tests and purifies those who devote themselves to God⁷. This mystical fire burns the sin in the hearts of the believers. When the sin is burnt off, the soul can see the Divine Light in its wholeness and purity. Origen gives the example of the spiritual experiences of Jeremiah, for whom the Word of God had become a fire devouring his heart (Jer. 20:9). The experience of this fire brought Jeremiah to the confession of sins and repentance. Origen also refers to the oral tradition of his time, which held that Jesus had said: 'The one who approaches me, approaches the fire'.

The dialectic of fire and light we referred to above may help us relate the mystical experiences of fire by believers (e.g. Jeremiah, Origen, Pascal, as well as today's Christians^{10,11}) with the image of the fires of hell, which await the souls of those who reject God. In both cases, the Divine Fire appears as a result of the interaction of the Divine Light with sin. The Divine Fire burns up the perishable (sin) and spares the imperishable (pure spirit). The difference between sinners and the righteous is this: while the righteous open up to the Divine Light in this life, living through the experience of the Divine Fire as a result of their sinfulness, unbelievers do not open up to the Divine Light and do not have the experience of the Divine Fire in this life. Their unprepared souls take the fullness of the 'burning out' of sins in the life to come. The difference between saints and unbelievers has more to do with their attitude to sin, than with the amount of it. A believer does not associate his sin with who he is, but rejects it as foreign material. He experiences the 'burning out' of his sins as a blessing more than a torment because the *Fire of God* destroys only what he himself wants to destroy. Unrepentant sinners, conversely, associate their sins with who they are, loving it as part of themselves, and, hence, perceive the 'burning up' of sin as the destruction of their selves. In both cases, however, the function of the Divine Fire remains the same.

CLASSIFICATION AND STATISTICS OF THE THEMES OF FIRE IN THE BIBLE

The table below contains the main Biblical passages where fire is mentioned. This two-dimensional classification includes 30 potential categories and is a lot more detailed than similar classifications found in the literature, which typically identify only 5-6 species of fire. A two-dimensional principle of classification allows one to group Biblical passages according to two different aspects of fire: its ontological aspect (i.e. the different *kinds* of fire), and its functional aspect (i.e. what the fire *does*). In my view, this classification works well: the passages, which fall within one cell of the table, really belong together. The statistics, for further generalization, are tallied here by columns and by rows. In most cases, a passage will fall into one or another category with a reasonable degree of certainty, but in some cases the classification becomes slightly ambiguous, in which case the way one decides to classify the passage will largely depend upon one's interpretation of the text. For example, all the episodes of miraculous ignition of a sacrificial fire could be classified under two different headings, viz. 'sacrifices' and/or 'good omens'. In these trickier cases I tried to focus on the meaning of the text that appeared to me to be the most dominant. Only a few instances of fire in the Bible are not related to any religious context, and for this reason they are not included in the table.

Functions of fire	Weapon of punishment or destruction; manifestation of God's wrath	Help, purification, good omen, test	Sacrifice	Attribute of Divinity	Indication of sin or passions	Total
Kinds of fire						
Usual physical fire	3 Lev 20:14	0	5 Exod 12:8-11		3 Matt 14:67	11

	Josh 7:25 Deut 9:21		Lev 1-4 Lev 6:12-13 Deut 12:31 Num 3:4		Luke 22:54-56 John 18:18,25	
Physical fire with supernatural qualities	8 Gen 19:24 Exod 9:23,24 Lev 10:2 Num 11:1,2 Num 16:35 2King 1:10-12 Luke 9:54-56 Exod 24:17	11 Gen 15:17 Exod 3:3-4 Exod 19:18 Exod 13:12,22 1Kings 18:24 Judges 13:20 Deut 9:15 Dan 3 Isa 43:2 Acts 2:3 Isa 6:7	5 Lev 9:24 Judges 6:21 1Chr 21:26 2 Chr 7:1-3 1Kings 18:38	1 Deut 4:24	0	25
Fire in visions, poetic images and allegories	13 Gen 3:24 Deut 9:3 Deut 32:22 Jer 5:14 Ps 79:5 Ps 89:46 Ps 18:8 Nahum 1:6 Nahum 2:13 Nahum 3:15 Zeph 1:18,2:1 Obad 1:18 Zech 12:6	7 2Kings 6:17 Ps 66:10 Nahum 2:3,4 Zech 2:5 Zech 13:9 Mal 3:2-3 Ps 66:12	1 Heb 12:29	5 2Kings 2:11 Dan 7:9-10 Ezek 8:2 Rev 1:14 Jer 23:29	6 Isa 7:4 Isa 9:18 Isa 50:11 Isa 65:5 Prov 30:16 James 3:5-6	32
Heavenly fire, fire of Judgment Day and hell	22 Isa 3:2 Isa 5:24 Isa 9:19 Isa 30:27 Isa 33:11-14 Amos 1:2 Amos 4:11 Zeph 3:8 Micah 1:7 Zekh 3:2 Mal 4:1 Matt 3:12 Matt 5:22 Matt 18:8-9 Matt 25:41 Mark 9:41-48	7 Luke 3:16 Matt 3:11 Mark 9:49 1Cor 3:13-15 1Pet 1:7 1Pet 4:12 Rev 3:18			2 James 5:6 Prov 25:22	31

	2Pet 3:10-12 Luke 12:49 Rev 15:2 Rev 20:9,10 Rev 20:14,15 Jude 1:23					
Internal fire (in the heart)				2 Ps 39:3 Jer 20:9 Luke 24:32	3 Hosea 7:4-6 1Cor 7:9 Prov 6:27,28	6
Fire in general as element				2 Ps 104:4 Heb 1:7		2
total	46	25	11	11	14	107

Table 1. A list of Biblical passages where fire is mentioned. My tallies count the number of episodes, not the number of times the word 'fire' is mentioned.

The statistics given in the table can be summarized as follows:

1. Almost all cases are related to the key Biblical themes of God, the Divine, and sin.
2. Relatively little attention is given to ordinary physical fire – only about 11%. In other cases fire is miraculous or Heavenly or allegoric. Fire in the Bible is indeed the Lord's servant.
3. The theme of fire as a source of punishment receives more attention than the theme of fire acting in a more positive sense, but the counts are relatively comparable (46 and 25 respectively).
4. The theme of the Heavenly Fire (i.e. the fire of God's Judgment) clearly dominates among the different kinds of fire (31 case). This becomes especially clear if you tally 'Heavenly Fire' with the closely related theme of sin (14 cases), and with the fiery visions of the prophets, which have a clear eschatological emphasis. It can be suggested that this theme is of primary importance in the Bible, while other themes can be regarded as subsidiary variations on it, or as allegorical references to it. The sacrificial fire can also be related to the Heavenly Fire, because it has a similar function: it burns the sin transferred onto an offering.

SACRAL SPACES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The flame of the burning bush defined the first fire-centered sacral space in the Biblical history. God told Moses to take off his sandals before approaching the burning bush, "for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exod 3:5). Other instances of the creation of sacred spaces in the Bible are primarily related to altars and sacrificial fire. These sacral spaces could be visualized as circular structures with fire as the focus (*focus* means *hearth* in Latin). Thoughts, prayers and feelings, which streamed towards the fire as a center, were then redirected in a vertical, Heaven-directed movement indicated by the restless tongues of flame. The sacral significance of the altar and the fire thereon is made clear by the special attention that is given to it in the Old Testament tradition: the sacrificial fire at the altar near the Tabernacle was supposed to burn continuously, symbolizing the continuous presence

of the Lord among His people (Lev 6:12-13). Only the Levites were supposed to maintain the fire and put the offerings on it (Lev 1,2). Only the altar fire could be used in liturgies (Lev 10:2; Num 3:4). A coal taken from the altar fire cleanses the sins of Isaiah, when the seraph touches with it his lips (Is 6:7).

Sacrificial fire separated what remained on earth from what was set apart for God, serving thereby as a veil separating the Divine from the mundane. God's messengers could pass through this veil. For instance, before the birth of Samson an angel addressed Manoah and his wife from a sacrificial fire (Judges 13:20). Acting thus as a sort of barrier between the earthly and the Divine, fire delimited the sacral spaces. The first example of a fire-delimited sacral space was the Garden of Eden. After the fall, it became an exclusive zone of the Divine, which was forbidden to humans. It can be regarded as the first Holy of the Holies in history, with a flaming sword of a cherubim acting as a barrier. In a similar way, when Moses received the Decalogue on Mount Sinai, the fire on the mountain also worked as a barrier enclosing the sacral space of God's presence, which was open only to Moses. Also in the case of Abraham we find that the fire in the moving pot was used to indicate the sacral space, in which God's covenant with Abraham was concluded (Gen. 15:17).

According to the concepts of hierotopy⁵ - a field of study concerned with sacral spaces - most of the significant human-created sacral spaces are made through a so-called 'transfer of sacral spaces'. This concept means that the primary sacral space, which is defined by God Himself, is consciously reproduced in temples and sanctuaries, and is present there as an 'image-paradigm' (another hierotopical term). In Biblical history, the construction of the first Temple can be seen as a reproduction of the original sacral space of the Tabernacle. On the other hand, the first Temple was itself built under direct guidance of God, and can be viewed as a prototype for Medieval Christian sacral architecture. The altar fire of the first Temple is said to be reproduced in the candles lit on the altars of traditional Christian churches, from Eastern Orthodox to Lutheran. In our church, we light up four candles for Advent, and we like to have prayer circles around fires. Why do we do this? Do these experiences bring to mind the sacrificial fires and burnt offerings of the Old Testament? Does it perhaps make us think of the burning bush, or of the Pentecostal tongues of fire? Or do we find in these contemporary liturgical uses of fire a visible reflection of the *Fire of God*?

SACRAL SPACES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

It is of course well known that the sacred space of the Temple occupies an important place in the Old Testament. It may seem, however, that in the New Testament the theme of individual spiritual life takes over the function of temple rituals rendering them obsolete. There are numerous episodes in the New Testament that give us reason to reconsider this way of thinking. In Jesus's Presentation at the Temple (Luke 2:22-23), as well as in His wish, being still a child, "to be in His Father's house" (Luke 2:42-50) we find two examples that demonstrate how seriously the sacred space of the Temple is regarded in the Gospels. The climax of Jesus' earthly mission, including His final deeds before crucifixion, also occurs on the Temple grounds: not only does He cleanse the Temple of the merchants and money-changers,

but He also preaches there Himself. The tearing apart of the Temple curtain at the moment of the crucifixion also indicates a deep bond between Jesus and the sacred space of the Temple.

The experience of early Christians also testifies to a close relationship between the sacred space of the Temple and the spiritual life of Christ's followers. Indeed, the early Christians regarded the Temple as 'a house of prayer'. It is well known that the Twelve remained in Jerusalem after the crucifixion both in spite of the obvious dangers involved, and in spite of Jesus' direct order for them to go to Galilee. Did they remain close to the Temple out of a sense of stubbornness or insubordination, or because of their bond with the Temple's sacred space? It is more likely on account of the latter than of the former. Indeed, the book of Acts clearly reports to us about the first Church: "every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts" (Acts 2:46). Peter and John went to the Temple on a daily basis to pray at a set hour (Acts 3:1).

However, the Temple was not meant to last forever and, shortly after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, a new type of a sacred space has been born, a space marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit and *fire of faith*. The room, where the Twelve received the Holy Spirit at the Pentecost, has not been ritually sanctified beforehand. It was just an ordinary room that was made sacred due to the presence of the Holy Spirit of God and of the twelve apostles ready to receive His gift. The doors of the room were closed, for His presence was intimate. As in many other cases, His presence was marked by fire. In this unique case, the fire appeared above the heads of each person in the room. This signified a new role assigned to the human personality in the New Testament. The New Covenant is no longer collective in nature, but individual. Whereas in the Old Testament God dwelt amidst His people as a nation, now the tongues of His fire mark everyone who has been chosen by God, and who has been receptive to His call.

Henceforth, everywhere that Christian believers gather is made into a sacred space (Matt. 18:20). God still dwells amidst His people but in another sense than it was in the Old Testament. The worship hall and prayer rooms of the IBC Brussels are made sacred not by ritual practices, but through the presence of sincere believers and the fire of their faith. Even though there is no burning bush visible at our worship services, the floor on which we stand is just as holy ... and just as worthy of us removing our shoes when we stand on it.

FIRE OF FAITH AND PREACHING

In the Bible, the image of fire is often used to characterize strong faith and religious zeal. The fire in the heart and thoughts of the Psalm-singer testifies to the Divine source of his inspiration and expresses its intensity (Ps. 39:3). The fire burning in the body of Jeremiah induces him to serve and to do God's will in spite of the dangers (Jer. 20:9). The hearts of the apostles are said to be "burning within them" following the encounter with the resurrected Christ (Luke 24:32). Similar use of the image of fire is also typical for modern Christian language, especially when we speak about the contrast between nominal faith and the *fire of faith*, the latter being a concept frequently used in sermons^{8,9}. The *fire of faith* is ignited by the *Fire of God*. The purifying Divine Fire is reproduced in the hearts and souls of believers.

An example of a contemporary conversion ‘by fire’ is described in a novel by Margaret Cleator entitled *God who answers with fire*¹⁰. Arjun, a fictional character, goes through a personal encounter with God: “Arjun shut his eyes. He saw himself in the midst of the flames. Surrounded as it were by blazing purity and holiness, he saw his utter littleness, his petty pride in his education, his rebellious will – fit only to be burnt to ashes”. As a result of his experience of the *fire of God*, Arjun repents. He sees the contrast between his sinfulness and God’s holiness. He cries out unto the Lord: “O, God forgive me, I am so wretched!”

A *fire of God* experience may lead to such a significant renewal of a person’s relationship to God, that it could be called ‘a second conversion’. If we prefer to speak about a second conversion, and not a first, it is because this typically happens to people who already have significant experience in ‘walking with God’ (Jeremia, Origen, Pascal). In this connection some talk about a *baptism with fire* or a *baptism with the Holy Spirit*, which may occur after the initial baptism with water. Though the concept of a ‘second baptism’ might be terminologically inaccurate, its meaning is still quite understandable: a *Fire of God* experience may cause such a deep spiritual reformation, that calling it ‘a second conversion’ is not an exaggeration. The onset of the Pentecostal movement in the beginning of the previous century, for example, was marked with multiple reports of visions of fire¹¹.

The theme of the *Fire of God* is intimately related to the theme of God’s presence. The latter topic was covered in another IBC sermon of October 16, 2011, which was titled “God’s people and His presence”. In this sermon our pastor referred to Exodus 33:20-23 to show how God’s presence was not always sweet and pleasant, but could also be frightful. Moses wanted to see the glory of God, but what he heard in reply was: “When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.” Even for Moses, the immediate presence of God was too much to bear.

This example of Moses teaches us something about ourselves. We all have two aspects to who we are: a godly aspect (God’s image in us), which strives to know God and is longing for Him, and a sinful aspect, which fears His presence. God wants to come to us, dwell in us and destroy our sins. The *Fire of God* is a manifestation of His presence in us, His holiness, His glory, His wrath. The *Fire of God* burns out our sins.

One way to look at the theme of fire in the Bible is to consider the Bible as a collection of God-inspired sermons of different historical epochs. The central theme of the Bible as well as of practically any sermon is the relationship between man and God. The awareness of the *Fire of God* helps us to feel and understand intuitively the nature of our relationship with the Lord. Both God and fire are good but neither is safe. Once we make the connection between ‘fire’ and ‘God’ in our minds, we begin to transfer our instinctive awareness of the dangers and taboos associated with fire into a sense of godly fear and awe. Fire helps us to cast a deeply suggestive and moving image of God in our minds and hearts. It is an image that both responds to our longing and a fundamental need to know God, but it is also an image which commands respect and humility, and which inspires a proper sense of fear and trembling before God’s presence.

Dialectics of destroying and forming roles of fire is equally important for preaching. Fire in daily life and industry destroys what should be burnt or melt down, but helps to form new shapes and objects and also to change the properties of materials in the right direction. The theme of fire as a transforming force can also be found in the Bible. The Divine Fire refines Israel as silver (Ps. 66:10). Malachi compares God to fire, which will purify the Levites by refining as gold and silver (Mal. 3:2-3). Israel is hardened when going through fire and water (Ps. 66:12; Zech. 13:9). The allegory of fire helps us to see the Lord as a transforming force, which can also destroy. The Divine Fire burns the sin but strengthens the faith.

The *Fire of God* is not so much a subject of a formal theological discourse, but rather a spiritual reality, an active force of God, which transforms us, enhances our sense of God's presence and our strength to do His will. In his book entitled "A heart ablaze" ⁸ John Bevere poses a question "What kind of force Moses, Jeremiah, and first Christians possessed?" The question is a simple and common one. Indeed, we often marvel at the immense spiritual power of the heroes of the faith. Where did they find this strength? Are our spiritual lives any different from theirs? The answer to Bevere's question is the same for any man or woman of faith: it is the *Fire of God* that ignites and sustains our love of God and neighbor, that purges us of weakness and impurity, and that lights our way. In the same book, Bevere gives voice to a beautiful prayer, which I echo here in closing:

"Father, cause your holy fire to burn within my heart. Let its intensity consume me, causing me to love what you love and hate what you hate. I thank you in admiration for changing my life."

SUMMARY

1. Textual statistics shows that usual physical fire is rarely mentioned in the Bible. Biblical authors are interested in the theme of fire as a servant of God.
2. Statistics also points at the importance of the theme of the Heavenly Fire, that is, the fire of God's Judgement. It is this theme which dominates the Bible. The Heavenly fire burns up sin, but spares the righteous. Sacrificial fire has the same function: it destroys the sin transferred onto the offering and, as a consequence, the one offering the sacrifice is purified.
3. Dialectics of fire and light helps to interpret the ignition of fire by God as an action of the Divine Light, his uncreated energy, on sin and matter. The fire of hell can be understood as an action of the Divine Light on a sinful soul.
4. In the visions of fire, which accompany some conversions (in classical examples as well as in today's church), the Fire of God manifests itself as a sin-burning experience and as a call for repentance and change.
5. Our customary relationship to fire is similar to how a believer should relate to God: fire is attractive and frightful at the same time. It is both fundamentally necessary to our lives and dangerous. The use of the theme of the *Fire of God* both in the Bible and in today's preaching is based on this analogy. We learn to build our relationship with God by combining contradicting elements: love and fear, expectation of eternal bliss and fear of eternal punishment.

Some idioms of Biblical origin, which use the image of fire:

Baptism with fire (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16)

'To go through fire and water' (to escape from Egyptian captivity) (Ps 66:12)

Fiery eyes, flaming eyes (Rev 1:14)

Flaming heart (Ps 39:3; Jer 20:9; Luke 24:32)

Flame(s) of passion (Prov 6:27; Hosea 7:4-6; 1Cor 7:9)

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LITERATURE

¹ *Gaston Bachelard. The psychoanalysis of fire.*

² *Theological dictionary of the New Testament. Vol. 6. Ed. G. Friederich. Eerdmans Publishing. 1964. Also Lawrence O. Richards. New international encyclopedia of Bible words. Zondervan, 1985.*

³ *Pascal's memorial*, see <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/pascal.html>. Also M.F. Kokorev. *Pascal and Bachelard about mystical experiences of fire* (Ph. D. thesis, in Russian).

⁴ The concepts of substitutionary atonement and transfer of sin is discussed in many sources. I used *Tidball. The message of Leviticus. Free to be holy. Inter-Varsity Press, 2005, p.39-40*. On top of burnt offerings (Lev 1:4), the transfer of sin is very explicit in the ritual of the scapegoat (Lev 16:21).

⁵ *Alexey Lidov. Hierotopy. Spatial icons and image-paradigms in Byzantine culture*. Two chapters of this book are particularly connected to this work: *Holy fire* and *Creation of sacral spaces as a form of art and a subject of historical studies* (in Russian, with English summary).

⁶ The Florentine custom of the burning of the chariot, described in the book⁵ p. 277 might be related to the Biblical image of fiery chariots (2Kings 2:11, 6:17; Nahum 2:3,4).

⁷ *Origen. Spirit and fire*. A thematic anthology of his writings. Ed. H. U. von Balthasar. The Catholic University of America Press. 1956. pp. 325-331.

⁸ *J. Bevere. A heart ablaze. Igniting a passion for God. Messenger International, 2005*

⁹ *J. Chapman. Setting hearts on fire. A guide to giving evangelical talks. St. Matthias Ltd. 1984;*

¹⁰ *Margaret Cleator. The God who answers by fire, STL books, 1978, Ch. 11. Holy fire, pp.69-70.*

¹¹ *H. Cox. Fire from heaven. The rise of Pentecostal spirituality. Da Capo Press, 2001* (on visions of fire see Ch. 3. *The fire is spreading*, pp.67-70).