

The Theme of Fire in the Book of Revelation

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Fire as a Literary Theme: Starting Point	
<p>^{1:1} The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near. ⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia...¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; ¹³ and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. ¹⁴ His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun... ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.</p>	
Fire as Purifying	Fire as Destroying
<p>^{2:18} ‘And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze...</p> <p>^{3:14} ‘To the angel of the church in Laodicea write...¹⁸ I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹ ‘Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. ²⁰ ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹ ‘He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. ²² ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’’</p> <p>^{4:4} Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and</p>	<p>^{8:1} When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour... ⁵ Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. ⁶ And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them. ⁷ The first sounded, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. ⁸ The second angel sounded, and something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood...</p> <p>^{9:17} And this is how I saw in the vision the horses and those who sat on them: the riders had breastplates the color of fire and of hyacinth and of brimstone; and the heads of the horses are like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths proceed fire and smoke and brimstone. ¹⁸ A third of mankind was killed by these three plagues, by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which proceeded out of their mouths. ¹⁹ For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents and have heads, and with them they do harm. ²⁰ The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; ²¹ and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts.</p> <p>^{14:1} Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads...⁹ Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰ he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire</p>

golden crowns on their heads. ⁵ Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of **fire** burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God...

^{19:11} And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. ¹² His eyes are a flame of **fire**, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. ¹³ He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. ¹⁵ From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.

^{21:1} Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."... ⁹ Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy

and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.'

^{16:1} Then I heard a loud voice from the temple, saying to the seven angels, 'Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.'... ⁸ The fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun, and it was given to it to scorch men with **fire**. ⁹ Men were scorched with fierce heat; and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues, and they did not repent so as to give Him glory.

^{17:1} Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, 'Come here, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, ² with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality.'... ¹⁶ And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with **fire**. ¹⁷ For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled... ^{18:8} For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with **fire**; for the Lord God who judges her is strong. ⁹ And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality and lived sensuously with her, will weep and lament over her when they see the smoke of her burning, ¹⁰ standing at a distance because of the fear of her torment, saying, 'Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour your judgment has come.'

^{20:1} Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ² And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; ³ and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. ⁴ Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. ⁷ When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, ⁸ and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. ⁹ And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and **fire** came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰ And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of **fire** and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. ¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven

city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper... ¹⁸ ...the city was **pure gold, like clear glass**... ²¹ And the street of the city was **pure gold, like transparent glass**.

fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of **fire**. This is the second death, the lake of **fire**. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of **fire**.

Questions

1. What kind of 'prophecy' is this? Prophecy could mean:
 - a. *Insight*: tearing off the veils and cutting through the appearances/lies of the situation
 - b. *Foresight*: predicting the future
2. Which is this? I think it's both
 - a. *Insight* in the sense that John sees the truth about Jesus, the Roman Empire, power, persecution of Christians, and so on
 - i. 'Revelation' means revealing. What or who is this revealing? Jesus the Messiah
 - b. *Foresight* in the sense that John sees the Roman Empire as an archetype of Empires throughout history which will be in tension with the church and persecute God's people. I don't think that the *Left Behind* book series is correct, since it seems to assume that Revelation has only one fulfillment, which is happening with the European Union being the 'beast' and so on.
3. What do you think about Jesus' appearance? Why is he revealed this way?
 - a. Where did fire first appear in Scripture? After God sent Adam and Eve out of the garden. He put angels there at the gateway with flaming swords (Gen.3:24).
 - b. Where did the sword first appear in Scripture? Same place! The idea is that in order to get back to the garden, we would have to pass through a sword and fire. Human nature is corrupted by sin. So something needs to be cut away from us, and burned away. The imagery now settles on Jesus. If Jesus is the way back to the garden, we have to pass through his purified humanity, and his word (the teaching which came from his mouth).
 - c. Why is the sword two edged and coming out of his mouth? In most systems of swordsmanship you're only cutting with the front edge anyway. The advantages of having a two-edged sword are:
 - i. if your front edge gets dull, you can rotate the sword
 - ii. use the back edge, like a backward stroke while grappling
 - iii. stronger point tip, for piercing through leather and armor – that is the probably the purpose of the image of the sword coming out of Jesus' mouth
4. How does Jesus' purifying fire affect the churches?
 - a. For Thyatira, his eyes are like fire and his feet are like super-heated bronze. He is burning away idolatry and sin from them.
 - b. For Laodicea, he wants them to possess refined materials: gold refined by fire so that they can be truly rich, which refers to his character and not an actual material; white garments for clothing like the clothing he wears, which refers again to imitating his character; and eye salve to anoint their eyes so that they can have spiritual sight that pierces through the mundane and earthly to see the spiritual world. For the Laodiceans, too, Jesus' fiery presence is connected to their purification.
 - c. In Rev.4:5, the Spirit is portrayed as fire. That's consistent with how John the Baptist introduced Jesus: 'he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Mt.3:11). Then when the Spirit came at Pentecost, he brought 'tongues of fire' (Acts 2:1 – 3). And consistently in between those two points in time, Jesus spoke of the Spirit as a fire and believers as lamps that took in the fire and shining light (Mt.5:14 – 16; 6:21; 25:1 – 13), and he himself as a lamp with fire shining light (Jn.8:12). At his transfiguration he physically demonstrated that light (Mt.17:1 – 3), and the implication is that at his resurrection, he demonstrated that light at times.
 - d. At the end of the book of Revelation, there is a city coming from heaven. It seems to represent the purified people of God in some way. Notice that in Rev.21:18 and 21, the city is described as pure gold which looks like clear, transparent glass. Huh? Pure gold does *not* look like clear, transparent glass. Anyone wear glasses? Are your glasses gold tinted or gold colored or pure gold? Nope. So either this is gold and glass that are different than gold and glass now. Or these are literary references to *purified people*. Gold is pure when it has nothing impure in it. Glass is clear and transparent when it has nothing mixed in with it.
5. How does Jesus' purifying fire affect people who resist him? There are various ways it's portrayed. Collect observations. Then ask the questions below...
6. What are the reasons given for 'fire' on the earth? Who brings it about?
 - a. In heaven, angels pour it out as an expression of the wrath of God
 - b. On earth, human kings burn up the city (civilization) Babylon the Great (Rev.17:16)
7. So does the author of Revelation intend for us to interpret this dual theme in a certain way?
 - a. Heaven causes stuff on earth?
 - b. Earth causes stuff in heaven? Or being simultaneous?

- c. Simultaneous and parallel, without causation?
- 8. What about fire in Jesus' presence?
 - a. Fire is an expression of the *presence* of Jesus in Rev.14:9 – 10
 - b. The lake of fire is an expression of... Jesus' presence or absence? In Revelation, fire is an expression of presence – purifying presence.
 - c. Repeat after me: 'Heaven is the presence of Jesus. Hell is also the presence of Jesus.' So what makes the difference? *Your posture towards Jesus. How you feel towards Jesus.*
- 9. What about fire away from Jesus' presence? Doesn't 2 Thessalonians 1:9 say that? Actually, probably not.
 - a. Here are five 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)
 - v. They will be punished with eternal destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power (NLT).
 - 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, an American Eastern Orthodox priest:

'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

10. What Old Testament reference(s) are contained in the story of the lake of fire?
 - a. Exodus, where Pharaoh and the army of Egypt are thrown into the Red Sea. Also, Jesus sent the demons in the pigs into the Sea of Galilee (Mt.8:32; Mk.5:13; Lk.8:33), which was also a reference to the Red Sea victory in Exodus.
 - b. Notice that the main title for Jesus in the book of Revelation is ‘Lamb of God’, which is his main title in John’s Gospel, and the main image applied to him in John’s crucifixion narrative in John 19:17 – 42
 - c. (optional) ‘Are you saying that the lake of fire won’t be a literal lake of fire?’ I’m saying that we don’t know enough. Think of it this way: From Revelation 1, do you think that Jesus will be fiery metal and have a sword coming out of his mouth, literally? I think it’s safer to say that every motif in the book of Revelation is *literary* before it is *literal*. So I think there Jesus’ victory over the devil *will be like* God’s victory over Pharaoh at the Red Sea. Will there be a physical, literal lake with physical, literal fire? I don’t know. I suppose there will be a place where the defeated will physically exist. But I can’t be sure what it will be like in a physical, literal sense.
11. If fire is part of Jesus’ appearance and effect on all around him, how are we to understand this?
 - a. Fire is purifying, as Jesus intends it. But it is destroying for those who cling to the sin he is trying to burn away.
 - b. Application: We must desire Jesus more than our own sin. Jesus wants to purify that stuff away. If we cling on to something he is burning out of us, then we will have quite a problem!
 - 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.
12. 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.

13. Illus: For anyone who’s taken Latin, you might know of two phrases that describe this theme well:

“igne natura renovatur integra”
through fire, nature is reborn whole

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/>

“ignis aurum probat”

fire tests gold -- a phrase referring to the refining of character through difficult circumstances

For a fuller treatment of the theme of fire and the topic of hell throughout Scripture, see my papers:

- Hell as the Love of God, <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-hell-as-the-love-of-god.pdf>
- Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew's Gospel: <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness-as-hell.pdf>