

The Fire of Pentecost: A Historical Rendering of Acts 2

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Acts 2 has always been a foundational text for the Christian church, especially for those in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. It is the well-known scene where the Holy Spirit is poured out on the early church, and those present are empowered to change a world. The imagery in Acts 2 is striking and stirs the senses with both the sound of a mighty wind and the presence of **γλῶσσαι ὡσεὶ πυρός**, (tongues as of fire). Through the years emphasis has been placed on the supernatural understanding of this event. Many have speculated on what it would have been like to hear that sound or see the fire come down to rest on those gathered. Much of the commentary on this passage is concerned with a visual description of Acts 2:3, “There was an appearance of something like flaming fire lighting on every one of them, which divided asunder, and so formed the resemblance of tongues, with that part of them that was next their heads divided or cloven. The flame of a candle is somewhat like a tongue.”¹ Another main concern of commentators revolves around the description of the flame as a tongue. Almost everyone wants to link that description with the diffuse languages which will be heard. “The symbolism is evident: tongues are the shape of the fire because the Spirit will enable the apostles to speak.”² This instinctive urge to understand Acts 2:3 through

¹ Henry, Matthew, San Francisco, Zondervan, 1964. Pg.

² Fitzmeyer, Joseph, Acts, Anchor Bible Commentary, New York, Doubleday, 1998. Pg.238

the experience of our senses is understandable but is perhaps misguided. A better way to read Acts 2:3 is to understand the description as a literary reference drawing on the use of fire associated with theophanies, and the rich tradition of throne visions. With this in mind a new understanding emerges from this well-known passage in Acts 2.

Throughout the Old Testament fire served as the phenomenon most often present when God appeared to His people. The God of Israel appears to Moses in Exodus 3 in a bush that is aflame yet not being consumed by that fire. As the Hebrews escape Egypt God leads them by night in a pillar of fire. This pillar of cloud and flame moved and actively intervened in behalf of Israel in Exodus 14 by hindering the army of Pharaoh. When Moses encountered God at Mt. Sinai, the description is that God descended on the mountain in fire (19:18). Later, when the Tabernacle is constructed the presence of the Lord was represented by this cloud of flame.

³⁴Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁵Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁶Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; ³⁷but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. ³⁸For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud[□] by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey. (Exodus 40:34-39, NRSV)

This same cloud and flame filled the Temple when it was dedicated under the reign of Solomon centuries later (1 Kings 8:10). To the nation of Israel, the flaming cloud was not only God, but the visible sign His official residence was the Temple.

If the flaming cloud was the official depiction of the God of Israel, fire was consistently depicted in other interactions as well. This is perhaps best seen in Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal. The terms of the contest were to see whose God would

answer the prayers offered, and the proof of God's answer would be fire (1 Kings 18:18-24). In the following chapter of 1 Kings the voice of the Lord speaks to Elijah immediately following the presence of fire. Fire has become synonymous with the presence of God, the action of God, and the element that surrounds His throne. Simply put, "Fire is a standard element in biblical theophanies."³

By the time of the Exile this had become ingrained within Judaism, and the description of a flaming cloud becomes the focal point for perhaps the most heart-wrenching scene in the Old Testament. Ezekiel has been taken captive with other Jews and from Babylon he describes a vision he has concerning the Temple in Jerusalem. After centuries of faithlessness and disobedience God has reached a breaking point with His people. In Ezekiel 10 the author describes the presence of God departing His home and throne in the Jerusalem temple. Once again, a flaming cloud is the feature of this vision.

"the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of the Lord . . . When he commanded the man clothed in linen, 'Take fire from within the wheel-work, from among the cherubim', he went in and stood beside a wheel. ⁷ And a cherub stretched out his hand from among the cherubim to the fire that was among the cherubim, took some of it, and put it into the hands of the man clothed in linen, who took it and went out." (Ezekiel 10:4, 6-7 NRSV)

Later in the chapter, "The cloud departs slowly, as if reluctant to leave. It moves deliberately from the Holy Place to the temple then on to the courtyard. There is a pause there as the prophet receives a further vision then the glory moves out of the Temple to the east."⁴ The implications of this vision could not be clearer – God has left His dwelling and His people are

³ Collins, John Daniel, *Hermeneia Commentary on the Bible*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 1993. Pg. 302

⁴ Duguid, Iain, *Ezekiel, NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1999. Pg. 147

in exile. Ezekiel purposefully leaves the reader with a feeling of helplessness. God's people are in exile, and His glorious presence has left the Temple. There seems to be little hope that remains.

Some may want to specifically link the fire in Ezekiel with the coals from the continually burning altar, but it does not need to be strictly dependent on a piece of altar furniture. As can be readily seen fire is consistently linked to God. This linkage continues after the description from Ezekiel 10 and is present in great throne visions found in later literature. This is perhaps most clearly seen in Dan 7, where the flames emanate from all around the throne. "Fire suggests something transcendent and absolute, awesome and dangerous, mysterious and destructive."⁵ With all of the Messianic expectations that were common within Judaism, one might expect to see ancient literature that describes God's presence coming back to His temple, but that is not what we find. Instead, we find these "throne visions" in apocalyptic literature where the human figure is taken on a heavenly journey or granted a vision where God's glory is seen in a distinctly non-Earthly manner. Along with Daniel, the book of 1 Enoch gives a vivid description of God's presence and descriptions of fire are once again prominent.

1 Enoch and Daniel are both products from a similar time period. Daniel can be dated confidently in 165 B.C.E.⁶ and 1 Enoch has been dated anywhere from the first century to the early third century B.C.E.⁷ One of the questions scholars have is determining what connection these two works have. Arguments have been made in various places that each are

⁵ Goldingay, John, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary. Word, Dallas, 1989. Pg. 164

⁶ Andrew Rillera, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 138 no 4 2019, p 757-776.

⁷ Nickelsburg 1 Enoch 1 – *Daniel*, Hermeneia Commentary, Augsburg 2001. Pg. xxiii

dependent upon the other, but what is the safest thing to say is that these two documents share at least a connection to a common source,⁸ and each is influential for those writing the New Testament. These works demonstrate what is understood by those who both wrote the New Testament, and by those who originally read it.

1 Enoch has some very important traits that are worth mentioning. In 1 Enoch 14 Enoch was allowed to see a heavenly vision where he is taken to a heavenly Temple that is surrounded again by fire. Here in 1 Enoch the language describing this fire has taken a specific form. In 14:9 this edifice is surrounded by **γλώσσαις πυρός**, “tongues of fire.” In the vision Enoch entered these tongues of fire, where he sees a second house which is described as greater than the previous edifice. This house contains a great throne built again with “tongues of fire.” Upon this throne sat the One described as the Great Glory. The imagery is a continuation linking fire with God that is seen throughout Jewish Literature. However, the wording has changed. In 1 Enoch fire has become “tongues of fire,” and I think this wording is more important than we might think.

There are two issues that must be discussed at this point. The first is dating 1 Enoch. While there is no exact agreement of a specific date for 1 Enoch, there is a widespread consensus that 1 Enoch was developed anywhere from the late 4th century BCE⁹ to early first century BCE.¹⁰ This places 1 Enoch firmly between the forlorn imagery of Ezekiel 10 and the burst of Christian literature produced in the first century CE. The second issue is one of language.

⁸ Ryan Stokes, *Throne Visions of Daniel* 7

⁹ Neusner, Jacob and William Green, *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*. Hendricksen, Peabody, 1996. Pg. 194

¹⁰ Buttrick, George, ed. *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1962. Pg. 104

While there is still debate over whether Hebrew or Aramaic was the original language of 1 Enoch, if not both, it is a fact that we have not only Hebrew and Aramaic fragments of 1 Enoch, but Greek and Latin fragments as well. In the centuries before Christ, and the first century itself, 1 Enoch had become a widespread and influential work.

This is an obvious point to make. 1 Enoch is directly quoted in Jude 1:14 and played an important role in the early church. It seems to have been used as a source by the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and was widely read in the early centuries of Christianity.¹¹ Far from being an obscure literary work, 1 Enoch would have been both widely read and well known in the first century to both Jewish and early-Christian readers. This would have been especially true of the early church where the divide between Jew and Gentile was not distinct yet.

The temptation for the modern reader is to assume that the descriptions from the New Testament are either journalistic in nature and describe the exact events observed at the time, or somehow spring fresh and new from the mind of the writers. We are tempted to forget that these writers are products of their time and tend to describe events in the ways that their readers would be familiar with. What if this is the case with Acts 2? If Luke was immersed in the world of the early church and familiar with the popular texts of his day, we should expect to see phrases and ideas that reflect that time. Acts 2 is rarely read in this historical manner, but if we do, a rich meaning emerges.

It is natural to assume that the early readers of Acts would have read this description within the context of its historical background. With the background of Ezekiel, Daniel and 1

¹¹ Charlesworth, James, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. New York, Doubleday, 1983 pg. 8

Enoch in the recent background, any mention of a flaming presence would have led the early reader to God's presence. It is widely accepted that the gospel of Luke copied widely from the gospel of Mark, and Mark quotes from every chapter of Daniel. The allusion to flame as accompanying God's presence would have been fresh in the author's mind. Yet our stubborn tendency to read Acts 2 as a physical description remains. Many still read the Pentecost account and primarily see a miracle of sound and sight.¹² It is argued that Pentecost was truly different, and the trait that demonstrates it is the sound of the wind and the appearance of the fire.

There are many good reasons to read Acts 2 with a historical and literary context. First, Acts was written some 50 years after the events it describes. This gives ample time for theological reflection and placing these events within a context larger than a simple physical description of what happened. Second, there seems to be hints within the text that Luke is not simply giving us a physical description. "Luke does not say it was actually fire which the people saw."¹³ The phrase used is **γλῶσσαι ὡσεὶ πυρός**, "tongues which appeared like fire." Perhaps the most important hint that what is being described is not primarily a visual description is the word **διαμεριζόμεναι**, which has been translated in a variety of ways. Many times it has been used almost as a physical description – the tongues were divided, or "cloven tongues."

¹² Larkin, William. *Acts*. Downers Grove, IVP, 1995. Pg. 49

¹³ Allen, Clifton, ed. *Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol 10. Nashville, Broadman, 1970, p. 25

This obscures the true sense of this uncommon word. This word does not physically describe the fire, but what the fire is doing – it is being distributed among those who were there.

there is something significant about **διαμεριζόμεναι** "distributing themselves" or "being distributed" since it shows that the gift of the Spirit (i.e., the Spirit himself) is coming upon all the persons there; this inclusive welcoming is precisely the point that Peter will make quoting from Joel 2. I see this equal opportunity Spirit of God as quite significant. At the end of 2:3 is further confirmation that "distribution" is the theme: **ἐφ' ἓνα ἕκαστον αὐτῶν**, "upon each single one of them."¹⁴

This has been noticed by a few other commentators as well.¹⁵ This also serves to lessen the link that some wish to maintain to the physical properties of the fire. We would expect that an author in the first century would write using the historical understandings of that time, and the author of Acts is no different. If the historical Jewish understanding of the link between God and fire is in the background of Acts 2, a rich, new meaning emerges.

From His first interaction with Abraham, Israel's God has often appeared with fire. This fire was also the sign that Israel's God is acting upon the world. The armies of Pharaoh and the prophets of Baal could all testify to the ability of Israel's God to appear with fire. Israel was introduced to this God in the wilderness Tabernacle where God dwelled in the form of a flaming cloud. When the cloud moved, the Hebrews moved with the cloud, and they would encamp when the cloud would stop. That presence was later housed in a permanent building built by Solomon. The Temple was the center for Israeli life and was the place where God's presence interacted with His creation. The Temple was what distinguished Israel from the other nations, and the presence of

¹⁴ Fred Long, Director of Greek Instruction Asbury Seminary, Interview by author. Wilmore, Jan. 16, 2023

¹⁵ Conzelmann, Hans, *Acts*, Hermeneia Commentary on the Bible. Philadelphia, Fortress, 1987. P. 14

God was their source of strength, safety and identity. The entire self-identity of the Jewish people was shattered with the Exile. They were forced from their land of promise and were marooned in a distant land far from their beloved Temple. The prophet Ezekiel then proclaimed that Israel should not expect a rescue from God and described the heart-wrenching scene of God's presence leaving Israel's Temple. The people were definitely on their own.

While not returning to the Temple, the imagery of God's presence did not disappear. If anything, it only strengthened in the years following the exile. Daniel was granted a vision where he was allowed to see God's throne.

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One[d] took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.

A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. (Daniel 7:9-10, NRSV)

The vision in Enoch also is a vision of God on His throne, but is connected with a heavenly Temple.

Behold, in the vision clouds invited me and a mist summoned me, and the course of the stars and the lightnings sped and hastened me, and the winds in the vision caused me to fly and lifted me upward, and bore me into heaven. And I went in till I drew nigh to a wall which is built of crystals and surrounded by tongues of fire: and it began to affright me. And I went into the tongues of fire and drew nigh to a large house which was built of crystals: and the walls of the house were like a tessellated floor [made] of crystals, and its groundwork was of crystal. . . A flaming fire surrounded the walls, and its portals blazed with fire. And I entered into that house, and it was hot as fire and cold as ice: there were no delights of life therein: fear covered me, and trembling gat hold upon me. And as I quaked and trembled, I fell upon my face. And I beheld a vision, And lo! there was a second house, greater than the former, and the entire portal stood open before me, and it was built with tongues of fire. (1 Enoch 14:8-15)

The language of tongues of fire in Acts 2 is not accidental, and it should be noticed by the careful reader of the New Testament. This language of fire matches the development of the language describing the presence of God within Judaism and the early Christian literature. If this wording is intentional then what is being described is nothing less than the return of God's presence to His temple. God has returned to His temple, but that Temple is no longer a building made by human hands, but in the lives of His people. This is phenomenal news! The climactic scene of Jewish literature described the departure of God from His people who were in exile. In Acts 2 this exile has definitively ended and God's presence has returned. The promise of Joel 2 has been fulfilled.

This return of God's presence has come to God's people collectively again. However, there is a new, individual dynamic in the language of Acts 2. We have previously seen that with the use of **διαμεριζόμεναι** each person present was touched with flame. Also, Luke probably meant that the divine presence was resting on each person individually as well. This idea of the Spirit resting on an individual is present in Num 11:26 and is familiar to Judaism, but is not a distinctly Jewish thought.¹⁶ Some might question whether too much is being made from historical context here, but it should be remembered that Pentecost was a Jewish festival and every person there would have been Jewish. While new to the modern reader this language of God presence would have been familiar to all present there.

Unfortunately, many today are reluctant to engage the text in a historical manner. There is the

¹⁶ Barrett, C.K. Acts, International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1994. Pg. 114

modern fear that some are trying to relegate the text to a privileged few. This is unfortunate.

The text means what was meant when it was originally written. The New Testament authors were creatures of their day, just as we are. When we investigate the background of the authors it helps bring focus to the text in new ways, and it does here as well. If there are those who fear that meaning is being drained from the text it is unfounded. When we keep in mind the historical references to the presence of God, a deeper meaning emerges from Acts 2. God's people are in exile no longer. God has turned to His temple, which are the lives of His church, both collectively and individually.