

On Fire, Sodom, Gehenna and the Lake

All fire is not the same. Obviously the fire of the bush that burned, but was not consumed (when Yahweh first met with Moses) was not the same as the fire with which they cooked their meals. God's fire is different. Strange fire was not to be used in lighting God's altars. And even in the natural, lightning is different from fire that burns wood -- even though lightning can heat up a tree to the point of combustion, and thus we have a forest fire which was actually ignited by an electrical charge completing a circuit and "arching."

So how are we to know the character or nature of fire when we read of it in Scripture? The answer is the "context," or what the text says about it. Consider the situation with Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 19:24.

The NIV says "Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah -- from the LORD out of the heavens." We are acquainted with the results. The whole burnable area was burned up, and vs. 28 tells us that the smoke (from the burnable items) of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. Now this is interesting, in that we see that apparently there is burning sulfur in the heavens (or, is it here simply lightning from the sky?).

Are the heavens, then a storehouse of fire and brimstone (sulfur)? It would appear so, from this account.

Next, what was burned up? Flesh, and other combustibles (probably wood, hay and stubble). The men died prematurely by an act of God. It was a physical judgement just like other physical judgments from God upon men throughout the OT. Yet, we read in Jude 7 that this judgment was "an example (a specimen; something pointed out to the sight) of fire pertaining to the ages (or: age-lasting fire; fire having its source in and qualities from the ages)..." Now please note: the fire did not continue burning after all the fuel was consumed. It is not burning now. So, the fire was not "eternal," which is a subject to be discussed at another time. The fire did what God wanted it to do: destroy the men and the towns of that area.

To compare the terms "fire and brimstone" (or: burning sulfur) here with that in the book of Rev., let's read it from the LXX (the Greek version of the OT):

"And the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah $\theta\epsilon\iota\omicron\nu$ (theion) and fire from the Lord from out of the midst of heaven." I give here the Gr. word often translated "brimstone," or "sulfur," for you to note its spelling. This word is actually the neuter form of $\theta\epsilon\iota\omicron\varsigma$ (theios) which means: Deity. With the definite article (the) before it, it means "the Divine nature." The same words are in the Greek text of Rev. 19:20 where we read of "the lake (or: pond) of the Fire (a figure of God) continuously burning within [the] Deity (theion)." So if its the same as that which killed those of Sodom and Gomorrah, what will it do to those who take the mark of the beast? I suggest that it will kill them. But what does this mean?

Well, it's called "the second death" when "death and the Unseen (hades) are cast into the lake of fire," in Rev. 20:14. But, in effect, the figure here (and I suggest that this is figurative language -- but that is for the Holy Spirit to show you) is the consuming of both death and the Unseen (hades), for these are both temporal things that have to do with His creation. It would also consume wood, hay and stubble (man's worthless works -- I Cor.3:12-15), as well as all flesh -- just as it did in Gen. 19:24. Now note vs. 15 of I Cor. 3: "but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."

Now lets consider Sodom, again. God calls Sodom Jerusalem's sister in Ezk. 16:48. And in vs. 49 lists Sodom's iniquity: "pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness... neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy."

Now in vs. 51, we see that Jerusalem "has multiplied [her] abominations more than [Sodom and Samaria], and has justified [her] sisters in all [her] abominations which [she] has done." This is echoed by Jesus in Matt. 10:15, "Truly I say unto you, 'It will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city." Then, speaking to Capernaum, He says in Mat. 11:23-24 that Capernaum will be brought down "as far as the Unseen (Hades)," and, again, "it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom, in the day of judgment, than for [Capernaum]." So, it would seem, that although Sodom and Gomorrah were consumed by God's fire and deity, it was not the end for them.

Back to Ezk. 16:53, "When I shall BRING AGAIN their captivity, the captivity of Sodom and her daughters... then will I bring again the captivity of thy [Jerusalem's] captives in the midst of them."

And vs. 55, "When thy sisters, Sodom and her daughters, shall return to their former estate... then you [Jerusalem] and your daughters will return to your

former estate."

Now here, we've been talking about the same fire that judged Sodom and Gomorrah, and the fire and deity in Rev. 14:10 & 19:20. Same exact words in the Greek. Now here in Rev. 14:10-11, they are being examined (tested, as gold is tested for quality) by the touchstone "in the presence of The Little Lamb" into "the indefinite periods of time which comprise the ages." Note that the figure is "the little Lamb," not the King or the Judge, nor the Jailor. Present before them, like the serpent on the pole in the wilderness, is the Lamb, having been slain, but living. And within the flames of His divine nature, they will be purged of their dross (ref. to Mal. 3:2-5), and when they behold Him, they will see the Glory of the Risen and Reigning Lamb, and will be transformed into the same image (2 Cor. 3:18).

Now consider the contexts of Jesus saying that it is better to pluck out your own eye or cut off your own hand than to be cast into the fires of Gehenna. Very few will think that Jesus was speaking literally of digging out a physical eye, or of chopping off a literal hand. He was using hyperbole, a figure of speech, saying "stop looking at things that cause you to miss the mark -- don't let the lust of the eyes lead you astray; stop doing (putting your hand to) things that lead you into failure and error."

If you can accept that He spoke figuratively here, then why should His words of the consequences of continuing in error not also be figurative? And if this be true, then of what is "the Gehenna of fire" a figure? It was a picture of the end of a criminal's life -- he might well end up being crucified by the Romans, and then thrown in with the burning garbage and manure and the bodies of dead inedible animals within Jerusalem's city dump: Gehenna. So what did it represent? I suggest it represented the end of a wasted life -- one of constantly missing the target (sinning). He came to call them higher, to proclaim the kingdom of God and to show them the Way, the Truth and the Life. Anything else is loss and waste, and He was simply saying, "Don't waste you life." And further, He indicated that one can be maimed, or have scars of the former life, and yet be in the kingdom -- in Life. Yet He is in the habit of making the waste places a garden (Isa. 51:3) -- because of His grace and mercy.

His love and grace are with you.
Jonathan