

logion 10

Jesus said:

*"I have cast fire upon the world, and behold,
I am watching over it until it blazes."*

Commentary

The fire of which Jesus speaks is the fire of the knowledge of God. That God is known as fire has already been said: *For see how the Lord comes in fire.*¹ When, early in the Bible story, YHVH made his covenant with Abraham, in the first theophany described in Genesis, his presence is already recorded thus: *When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, there appeared a smoking furnace and a firebrand that went between the halves.*²

Bearing the knowledge of God, this fire is to be identified, too, with the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, bringer of consolation of whom Jesus says that *he lived among us and is in us*. What this means is that this fire, this Spirit, is in us—in every man that is born, and from birth—yet, the fire of knowledge can be received in the consciousness only once it is ready, or has readied itself, to know it.³ Then the Spirit melts into man like a tongue of fire, in a birth *from above* through baptism by fire. This fire may be described as a firebrand, for it seems to emerge from thick darkness, as in Genesis; or as *a stream of fire*, in the words of Daniel, when he speaks of his theophany.

This fire is to be found in all accounts of divine manifestation, for it describes figuratively the *first* knowledge of God. This knowledge is not, however, that of identification with God, typically expressed as a cloud through which a voice is heard. The apostles must have known this cloud during the transfiguration of Jesus, when it is said to have come *and covered them with shadow*,⁴ meaning that they identified with it.

¹ Isai. 66:15

² Gen. 15:17

³ John 14:17

⁴ Luke 9:34

The fire and the cloud are, in *Exodus*, the two guiding signs that accompanied the Israelites when they came out from Egypt and spent forty years in the desert, with YHVH leading before them *by day in the form of a pillar of cloud and by night in the form of a pillar of fire.*⁵

In the dense allegorical language of the ancient scriptures, this means that man who lives in God's darkness—by night—can awaken to his God thanks to the light spread by the splendor of the fire that *dwells in him*, that fire being knowledge and the spirit of truth which ever accompany and illumine whoever seeks it, seeing that light as his sole *treasure*. Later, for the one who *lives by Day*, comes the cloud into which he must enter, taking shelter in its shade. The fire and the cloud are indeed the protagonists of the way to knowledge and unity, and they represent God in every process of theophany; but the fire of the knowledge of God is the herald that goes before him. That is why the psalmist proclaims that a *fire precedes him as he goes*,⁶ adding that God *makes fiery flames his servants*.⁷ In Moses' first theophany on Mount Sinai, the mountain *was entirely wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended on it in the form of fire.*⁸

That fire signifies knowledge is clearly expressed when Moses first addresses Israel. At their meeting with God, the people, gathered at the foot of the mountain while it burned, heard the *sound* of his words, speaking *from the midst* of the fire. Initially, the covenant consisted for them in putting into practice the Ten Sayings written on the tables of stone; but to Moses, on the top of the mountain, in the cloud, it was granted not only to hear the voice but *something more.*⁹

The Lord's voice, the psalmist proclaims, *sharpens lightning shafts*¹⁰ to smite his foes who, as we already know, are those whom the scriptures call the enemies of the soul. That is why the

⁵ Ex. 13:21; Ps. 78:14; Ex.40:38; Isai. 4:5

⁶ Ps. 97:3

⁷ Ps. 104:4

⁸ Ex. 3:2, 19:18

⁹ Deut.4:10-14, 34:10; Num. 12:8

¹⁰ Ps. 29:7

fire that Jesus casts on the world devours such enemies¹¹ and why it is said that *the Lord your God is a consuming fire*.¹²

Isaiah, too, sings of that fire: *The land is set aflame by the wrath of the YHVH Sabaoth*.¹³ In this passage, the *land* means the *hylic*, the chaff to be devoured by fire, to complete the process of purification; in contrast with the celestial, the grain, the *pneumatic* man thus freed from all besetting impurities. The prophet Zephaniah expresses something similar: *On the day of the anger of the Lord, in the fire of his jealousy, all the earth will be consumed*.¹⁴ What all this means in the final analysis is the culmination of the process that began with baptism, and ends when all remaining impurities are consumed by fire. As for the man who is as pure as the grain stripped of chaff, Isaiah proclaims that God will guarantee his safety: *should you walk through fire, you will not be scorched*.¹⁵

The biblical authors show they understand perfectly well that if the devouring action of the fire of knowledge is to correspond to a function wholly turned towards the Lord, it is essential that it should be grounded in purity. Indeed, the knowledge that flows from the Advocate who dwells in us is no ordinary knowledge, but one that results from an attentive, unceasing search for the Word sown in us, until we find it. And the Word invariably provides pure knowledge, forged with pure motivation into a pure act. The biblical scribes express this requirement as having the quality and consistency of salted fire. Hence, in Leviticus: *You must salt every oblation that you offer*.¹⁶ This demand agrees with the observations transmitted by the evangelists, not only Matthew, with his *You are the salt of the earth*,¹⁷ but Mark with his somewhat enigmatic phrase: *For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is a good thing, but if salt has become insipid, how can you season it again? Have salt in*

¹¹ This is the meaning of the condemnation of Aaron's sons (Lev.10:2)

¹² Deut. 4:24; Isai. 29:6

¹³ Isai. 9:18

¹⁴ Zeph. 1:18

¹⁵ Isai. 43:2

¹⁶ Lev. 2:13

¹⁷ Matt. 5:13

yourselves.¹⁸ It is as though he were saying: knowledge purifies, but if it is to be effective and fulfill its function of drawing one closer to God, this salt must be within you.

Once one has understood the kind of fire Jesus has come to cast on the world, there can be nothing surprising about his plan to watch over the world until it is completely ablaze. In the synoptic text included by Luke,¹⁹ he expressed the wish that the fire were already kindled, completing the idea with a passage that can surely be understood only in terms of the hidden interpretation: *There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress until it is over*.²⁰

If it is clearly understood that Christ is the Son of Man who dwells hidden (unmanifest) in every man, it is not difficult to accept this passage. What Jesus wants is a universal baptism in which he is necessarily the only one baptized: the fire comes from the Father, from his wisdom, and as the only Son, he receives and transmits it as the knowledge of that wisdom to the consciousness of every man who makes himself worthy of such baptism. Thus, on receiving this flame of the knowledge of God in the form of tongues of fire, every man is baptized in Christ. These are solemn acts in which Christ is always and definitively at once the officiant and the oblation.

That is why, until this baptism, the only sign reserved for this generation, has been carried out—and we are in it—the *hidden* Jesus will not become fully manifest. So he will be under straitened circumstances, like the grain which, because of men's ignorance, has still not been freed from that chaff which does not want to be winnowed and consumed in the fire that burns forever.

¹⁸ Mark 9:49-50

¹⁹ Luke 12:49-50

²⁰ Loc. Cit. Doubts have been expressed about how to translate the Greek word *synéjōmai*, here rendered as "distress".