

**FIRE AS PROPHECY?
THE RELATION BETWEEN FIRE AND PROPHECY
AS THEOPHANY IN THE SEPTUAGINT AND WITH
REFERENCE TO THE REVELATION OF JOHN**

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Abstract

This investigation presents a brief survey of the interjection between the occurrences of fire imagery and its connections with prophecy as Theophany in the Greek Old Testament and with reference to the Revelation of John. Fire imagery frequently serves as a Leitmotif for God's revelatory presence. It is established that God's presence through fire imagery is closely connected with his message as part of divine revelation. Furthermore, this motif developed in one of two directions: sometimes with negative implications to humanity during God's wrath and judgement, i.e. during the process of the purification of his creation. At other times it developed with positive implications to humanity during God's mediation of his message of involvement and care, i.e. during the process of his glorification. It can be concluded that the connection between fire imagery and prophecy can be clearly observed in the Old Testament literature and that this connection is carried through into the Revelation of John. The fact of this connection could even be summarized in the statement that the mere presence of fire often functions as the revelatory presence of God and that this in itself serves as prophecy – either as a message of purification or of glorification. In this sense, “fire as revelation” might be understood to be “fire as prophecy”.

Israel's God had been closely associated with fire in ancient biblical times¹ and his presence was often revealed through fire.² As he was understood to be present where he speaks, his discourse was thus closely connected with the presence of fire.³ This, in turn, means that when one encounters fire imagery in the Scriptures, it often points to God's revelation in his creation.⁴ Given this context, it is the intention of this paper to search for connections between fire as an image of God's presence, on the one hand, and "prophecy" as a sequential function of God's fiery presence in the Revelation of John, on the other hand.⁵ In order to determine such a connection, it would be helpful to survey the Old Testament in search of the role, or the motif, of fire. But before this can be done, a remark should be made about the use of the term "prophecy" in this study. The term will be used in its broadest sense, in a maximalist manner, namely in the sense of "the revelation of God's message" – irrespective of whether this means intended verbal communication of God's message through the mediation of kings, prophets, priests and angels, or whether it simply refers to divine communication through non-verbal imagery used by God, such as when he sets sacrifices alight with fire from heaven, or fills the sanctuary with his "glory". It is then particularly this interjection between the Divine "non-verbal communication" through the imagery of fire, on the one hand, and the "verbal communication" through the voices and tongues of special mediating humans

¹ Such an image was not unknown in antiquity at all, if one considers, for instance, the Egyptian sun god Re, the Greek god Helios and the Tyrian sun gods. For the latter, see J. Morgenstern, *The Fire upon the Altar* (Leiden: Brill, 1963) 102-113, for a discussion of the Tyrian Festival. W. Eichrodt, however, noted that the Israelite view was distinctive as God's revelation took place by "natural forces which break out with startling suddenness..." (*Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. II* [London: SCM Press, 1982⁴] 16).

² Cf. W. Eichrodt: "Because of this close relation between Yahweh and the elemental power of fire attempts have been made to explain him as originally a fire-demon, and therefore a nature deity like the rest" (*Theology II*, 17). F. Siegert points to an important difference in this regard between Philo and the Stoics. Philo "hält 'diejenigen' (sc. Die Stoiker) für 'töricht und leichtgläubig, die glauben, daß das Feuer bei dem Propheten (Mose) das Wesen ... Gottes sei'; es sei nämlich nur das 'scheinbare Aussehen' seiner Herrlichkeit" (*Philo von Alexandrien. Über die Gottesbezeichnung 'wohlätig verzehrendes Feuer'* (De Deo) [WUNT 46; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988] 103).

³ Cf. R. Hildesheim refers to its role as "göttliche Strafgericht" and as "Gemeinschaft mit Gott" (*Bis daß ein Prophet aufstand wie Feuer. Untersuchungen zum Prophetenverständnis des Ben Sira in Sir 48,1 – 49,16* [Trier Theologische Studien 58; Trier: Paulinus, 1996] 87).

⁴ "The manifestation of God in fire had already betrayed a sense that the lineaments of the divine were not confined to any fixed forms, but were inconceivable by Man" (W. Eichrodt, *Theology II*, 19).

⁵ The connection between "fire" and "logos" are certainly interesting against the backdrop of Stoic philosophy. Cf. T. Paige, "God was variously described as 'fire,' 'reason' (*logos*) or 'spirit' (*pneuma*)" (s.v. "Philosophy", in G.F. Hawthorne & R.P. Martin (eds), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* [Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993] 713-716, here 715).

and angels, on the other hand that this study wants to investigate. It is the crossing of these two lines that will be investigated here. The (Greek) Old Testament can greatly assist in this regard as it provides helpful hermeneutical keys for the understanding of fire imagery (an apocalyptic motif) and divine revelation by means of prophecy.

1. Fire as an image of God's ontological presence (theophany)

1.1 According to the Pentateuch

In the Pentateuch, the presence of God was visible at instances such as when “the angel of the Lord” appeared to Moses “in a flame of fire” (ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐν φλογὶ πυρός, Exod 3:2); or when God accompanied the people of Israel at night with the column of fire (ἐν στύλῳ πυρός) during the Exodus in the desert (Exod 13:21-22; 14:24); or when “Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire (τὸ δὲ ὄρος τὸ Σινα ἐκαπνίζετο ὄλον διὰ τὸ καταβεβηκέναι ἐπ’ αὐτὸ τὸν θεὸν ἐν πυρί, Exod 19:18);⁶ or when the “glory of the Lord sanctified” (ἀγιασθήσομαι ἐν δόξῃ μου, Exod 29:43) or “filled the tabernacle” (δόξης κυρίου ἐπλήσθη ἡ σκηνή, Exod 40:34, 35). Furthermore, God’s presence became clear when fire came from the Lord (ἐξῆλθεν πῦρ παρὰ κυρίου, Lev 9:24) and consumed the burnt offering of Aaron and Moses in the Tabernacle.⁷ Simultaneously, though, the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, died by the same fire from the Lord (ἐξῆλθεν πῦρ παρὰ κυρίου, Lev 10:2) because their fire was a “different” or “strange fire”⁸ (πῦρ ἀλλότριον, Lev 10:1) that did not come from God. The symbolism of fire as an indication of God’s presence in the Pentateuch, further becomes clear in the fire that devours the sacrifices on the altars⁹ and especially in the prescription for the “perpetual fire, never to be

⁶ “In Exod 19:18, the emphasis is on the heavy smoke, ‘because the Lord descended upon it in fire,’ and upon the quaking of the mountain” (D.E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* [WBC 52B; Dallas: Word Books, 1998] 880). Cf. J. Maier: “... die Offenbarung des göttlichen Wortes erscheint (verbunden) mit unheimlichen kosmischen Erscheinungen wie Gewitter, Feuer, Erdbeben etc” (*Geschichte der jüdischen Religion* [Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1972] 202).

⁷ Cf. D.C. Thomas: “It was God’s fire, the consuming heat of his Holy Presence, that broke in upon that moment of worship, and the offering was consumed” (“Holy and Unholy Fire”, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 2, no. 3 [1979] 213-216, here 213).

⁸ For different opinions on what this meant, see J.M. Cohen, “*Acharei mot* and the Strange Fire”, *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1) (2006) 51-54.

⁹ See J. Morgenstern: “In three different places, vv. 2b, 5 and 16 (i.e. of Lev 6, *GJS*), this matter is dealt with in such a manner as to indicate that in the minds of the authors of this section the subject of the fire upon the altar was one of more than ordinary significance” (*The Fire upon the Altar* [Leiden: Brill, 1963] 1).

extinguished or allowed to go out”¹⁰ as reported in Leviticus 6 (καὶ πῦρ ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον καυθήσεται ἀπὸ αὐτοῦ καὶ οὐ σβεσθήσεται, 6:5 [6:12 in English translations]).

1.2 According to the historical writings

The historical writings continued the motif of God’s presence which is revealed through fire. 2 Samuel (2 Kingdoms) 22 reports how “smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth” (ἀνέβη καπνὸς ἐν τῇ ὀργῇ αὐτοῦ, καὶ πῦρ ἐκ στόματος αὐτοῦ κατέδεται, 22:9)¹¹ and how “out of the brightness before him coals of fire flamed forth” (ἀπὸ τοῦ φέγγους ἐναντίον αὐτοῦ ἐξεκαύθησαν ἄνθρακες πυρός, 22:13). Furthermore, in 2 Chronicles 7, after Solomon finished his prayer, “fire came down from heaven (τὸ πῦρ κατέβη ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord (δόξα κυρίου) filled the temple” (7:1).¹² An important connection is made here between fire and the glory of the Lord. This would become more evident in the prophetic and apocalyptic literature.

1.3 According to the prophetic literature

In the prophetic literature, God’s presence was particularly revealed through this special fiery radiance, which was understood as the “glory of YHWH” (e.g., Isa 60:1-2 MT: *קְדוֹתָא דְיְהוָה*), or the “glory of the Lord” (ἡ δόξα κυρίου, Isa 60:1-2 LXX). The motif is also found in passages such as Isa 6:1-7 with the vision of God on his throne and in his temple, as well as in Haggai when he instructs the rebuilding of his “house” so that he might be “glorified” (ἐνδοξασθήσομαι, Hag 1:8). It is seen, furthermore, in Malachi when God laments the corruption of the priesthood and that his name is glorified amongst the nations (τὸ ὄνομά μου δεδόξασται ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, Mal 1:11).

1.4 According to the apocalyptic literature

A vivid image of this radiant light of God’s presence can also be seen in Ezekiel’s visions. Ezek 1:27-28 describes the human form on the throne with “something that looked like fire” with “a splendor all around” (ὡς ὄρασιν πυρὸς καὶ τὸ φέγγος αὐτοῦ κύκλω) – which was “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (ἡ ὄρασις ὁμοιώματος δόξης κυρίου). In Ezekiel 10, the “glory of the Lord rose up” and fill the court “full of the brightness of the glory

¹⁰ J. Morgenstern, *Fire*, 1. Cf. Lev 6:12.

¹¹ This image is also present in Ps 17:9 LXX (πῦρ ἀπὸ προσώπου αὐτοῦ κατεφλόγησεν) and Isa 30:27 (ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θυμοῦ ὡς πῦρ ἔδεται).

¹² It is interesting, though, that this section is absent in the parallel passage of 1 Kings (3 Kgdms) 8:62-66.

of the Lord” (v. 4). A cherub took fire from the wheelwork and gave it to the man clothed in linen (10:6-8). The “glory of the Lord” moves again (10:18) until the “glory of *the God of Israel*” was above the cherubim at the east gate of the temple (10:19). In Ezekiel 43, the “glory of the God of Israel” (δόξα θεοῦ Ἰσραηλ, 43:2) travels from the east and the earth “shones with his glory” (ὡς φέγγος ἀπὸ τῆς δόξης κυκλόθεν, 43:2). It then enters the newly built sanctuary through the eastern gate and “the glory of the Lord filled the temple” (πλήρης δόξης κυρίου ὁ οἶκος, 43:5). In his vision, Ezekiel then hears “a voice speaking from the temple” (φωνὴ ἐκ τοῦ οἴκου λαλοῦντος πρὸς με, 3:6), announcing his eternal presence in the sanctuary (43:7, 9). Ezekiel is later shown that this gate at the eastern side shall remain shut, because “the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it” (44:1-2). Important to note here, apart from the “shining glory of the Lord” (fiery imagery), is also the connection with the “voice speaking from the temple” (prophetic imagery).

Furthermore, Dan 7:9-10 sketches a picture of the chariot throne of the “Ancient of Days” (παλαιὸς ἡμερῶν) that consists of fire: “his throne was a fiery flame (φλόξ πυρός), and its wheels were burning fire (πῦρ φλέγον). A stream of fire (ποταμὸς πυρός) issued and flowed out from his presence” (Dan 7:9-10).¹³ This apocalyptic image would later become an integral part of the early rabbinic *merkabah* mysticism.

Ezekiel presents a picture of God’s presence in the earthly temple, whereas that of Daniel presents a picture of God’s presence in heaven. The fire imagery of God’s presence in heaven continues in Revelation with references such as the seven flaming torches that burn in front of the throne and which are the spirits of God (ἑπτὰ λαμπάδες πυρὸς καιόμεναι ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου, ἃ εἰσιν τὰ ἑπτὰ πνεύματα τοῦ θεοῦ, Rev 4:5). But an interesting *Christological expansion* is also taking place here in Revelation between God’s presence in and through fire, on the one hand, and the presentation of the “Son of Man”, or the Rider of the white horse, the “Faithful and True One”, on the other hand, whose “eyes were like a flame of fire” (οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ αὐτοῦ ὡς φλόξ πυρός, Rev 1:14; 2:18; 19:12).

2. Fire as revelation of God’s message

The phenomenon of fire and God’s message seem to be closely connected in the biblical writings during the history of revelation. Eichrodt formulated appropriately in this regard, that

...the phenomenon of fire became linked with the visionary experience in which the prophet experienced within himself the domination of the divine

¹³ D.E. Aune calls this “river of fire” a “theophanic symbol” in his discussion of Rev 22:2 (*Revelation 17-22*, 1176).

*Lord in judgment and renewal, so fire, like storm and earthquake, acquired a predominantly symbolic significance as a representation of God's intervention in history and in the destiny of the individual, and its function as a means of making the invisible God concretely visible diminished in importance.*¹⁴

The use and application of the fire imagery as God's communication can mainly be noted in one of two ways. Firstly, this Divine presence through fire can be used with negative effects regarding God's wrath, judgement and punishment (purification and refinement).¹⁵ Secondly, this Divine presence through fire can also be used with more positive effects regarding God's covenantal relationship with his people in order to guide, care, reprimand and direct them (glorification). An example of the latter is found in Exod 33:18-19 when Moses asks to see the "glory" of God, upon which God confirms that he will let his goodness pass before him *and* that he will proclaim the name 'The Lord' before him – again joining the motifs of God's fiery presence and that of proclamation.

2.1 The presence of God's fire as judgement and punishment: *purification*

When the people of Israel complained about their misfortunes in the desert, God's anger against them is revealed through fire (ἐξεκαύθη ἐν αὐτοῖς πῦρ παρὰ κυρίου, Num 11:1). The same happened during the revolt of Korah, Dathan and Abiram when 250 men were consumed by the Lord's fire (καὶ πῦρ ἐξῆλθεν παρὰ κυρίου καὶ κατέφαγεν, Num 16:35).

The prophetic literature provides further glimpses into this fiery wrath of God, which "will go forth like fire and burn".¹⁶ The wrath of God has the function of purification (ἐν πνεύματι κρίσεως καὶ πνεύματι καύσεως, Isa 4:4) and cleans out all unwanted elements in order for that which is pure, to remain. Hence, when God comes to punish according to Isaiah, he "will come in fire (κύριος ὡς πῦρ ἥξει), and his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury and his rebuke in flames of fire (ἐν φλογὶ πυρός): for by fire will the Lord execute judgement (ἐν γὰρ τῷ πυρὶ κυρίου κριθήσεται)" (Isa 66:15-16).

¹⁴ W. Eichrodt, *Theology II*, 19.

¹⁵ Cf. P.B. Lee: "The symbolic word, 'fire,' displays two opposite functions: one is to purify precious metal, and the other is to burn the dross" ("Malachi's eschatological figures' arrival motif in Luke's Gospel", Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Pretoria, 2010, 69).

¹⁶ Cf, for instance: ἐξέλθη ὡς πῦρ ὁ θυμὸς μου καὶ ἐκκαυθήσεται (Jer 4:4); μὴ ἀναφθῆ ὡς πῦρ ἡ ὀργή μου καὶ καυθήσεται (Jer 21:12); ὡς πῦρ φλόγα, καὶ κατέφαγεν πάντα τὰ κύκλω (Lam 2:3); μὴ ἀναλάμψη ὡς πῦρ ... καὶ καταφάγεται (Am 5:6).

Also some Psalms refer metaphorically to the wrath of God as a burning fire, asking how long it will still burn like fire (ἐκκαυθήσεται ὡς πῦρ, LXX Ps 78:5; ἐκκαυθήσεται ὡς πῦρ ἡ ὀργή σου, LXX Ps 88:47), or describing it as “going before him, and consuming his adversaries on every side” (πῦρ ἐναντίον αὐτοῦ προπορεύσεται καὶ φλογιεῖ κύκλῳ τοὺς ἐχθροὺς αὐτοῦ, LXX Ps 96:3).

The fiery signs that are pointing to the ultimate *revelation of Christ* are well-developed in the section on the seven trumpets in **Revelation 8:2 – 11:19**.¹⁷ In this section, as God’s apocalyptic judgement draws closer to that as described in Rev 11:19,¹⁸ the role of fire and of God’s fire-and-star-like angels become vividly evident. The situation reminds strongly of that as described in Zach 13:9: “And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God’.”

There is a close connection between God’s presence through fire as means of purification and that of the angels (“messengers”) that he use to prophetically reveal his judgement in Revelation. An angel filled the censer with fire¹⁹ from the altar and throws it upon the earth resulting in several disasters (8:5): there came hail and fire, mixed with blood that hurled toward the earth, resulting in a third of the earth and a third of the plant life being destroyed (8:7); a great mountain that burned with fire was thrown into the sea, resulting in a third of the sea being destroyed (8:8-9); a blazing star fell upon the earth on a third of the water resources, resulting in many deaths (8:10-11); and a third of the light is destroyed, affecting day and night (8:12). God’s coming judgement is closely tied to the disastrous effects of fire and on the sources of light. As before Creation, and as before the coming of Christ in John 1, darkness now again starts to partially fill the earth. The fifth angel’s trumpet lead to a falling star that opens up the bottomless pit, resulting in the first woe with plagues and disasters by terrifying scorpion-like locusts who were equipped for battle like horses (9:1-11). When the sixth angel blew his trumpet, the voice from God’s altar orders the release of four angels. The riders of their armies had breastplates like fire and fire came forth from the mouths of the horses – fire which killed a third of

¹⁷ Cf. also (2 Thess 1:7-8): “...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God...”

¹⁸ Cf. also Rev 14:1 – 15:4, 7. “The closing ‘lightnings, sounds, thunders, earthquake, and great hail’ has already been a repeated indicator of the last act of judgment (so 4:5; 8:5; 16:18; see on 8:5b). In the Old Testament such series of cosmic phenomena indicate theophanies” (G.K. Beale, *The book of Revelation: A commentary on the Greek text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999] 618).

¹⁹ In reference to Rev 9:6, D.E. Aune is of the opinion that “the term πῦρ cannot simply be understood as ‘fire’ since something combustible must be added to a censer; therefore πῦρ should be translated ‘hot coals’ or ‘glowing embers’” (*Revelation 6 – 16*, 516 – 517).

humanity (9:13-21). In Rev 9:17, “(t)he idea of God’s judgment of his enemies is figuratively expressed in 2 Kgdms. 22:9 (= Ps. 18:8) LXX by the similar phrase καπνὸς ... καὶ πῦρ ἐκ στόματος αὐτοῦ (‘smoke ... and fire from his mouth’).”²⁰ Another angel, whose face was like the sun and his legs like pillars of fire, roars like a lion and swears that “There will be no more delay, but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets” (Rev 10:6-7). John is then instructed by a voice from heaven to take the little scroll in the angel’s hand, upon which the angel tells him to eat the scroll – which was sweet in his mouth but bitter in his stomach. He then received the order: “You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings” (Rev 10:8-11). In Rev 11:3 the “two witnesses are granted authority to prophecy” (δώσω τοῖς δυσὶν μάρτυσίν μου καὶ προφητεύσουσιν) – with “fire that pours from their mouths and consumes their foes” (11:5).²¹ Mounce remarked that “Fire-breathing prophets would not seem strange in the bizarre world of apocalyptic imagery.”²² This is then again a clear case where the motifs of fire imagery and prophecy interject with each other. Beale, too, has drawn attention to this connection between “fire as a metaphor for their ‘prophesying’ and ‘testimony’ (11:6–7)” leading to the future final judgement.²³

In the section on the seven signs, **Revelation 12:1 – 14:20**, those who followed and worshiped the beast receive their due part of God’s wrath through fire: they will “drink the wine of God’s wrath” (πίεται ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ) and be “tormented with fire and sulphur” (καὶ βασανισθήσεται ἐν πυρὶ καὶ θείῳ)²⁴ before the holy angels and the Lamb (14:10).

²⁰ G.K. Beale, *Revelation*, 511.

²¹ Cf. D.E. Aune, who remarks on Rev 19:16, that “The ‘man from the sea,’ a messianic figure in 4 Ezra, incinerates his enemies with a stream of fire that proceeds from his mouth (4 Ezra 13:10–11), but this is later softened by interpreting it as a reference to the judgment pronounced by the Messiah based on the Law (4 Ezra 13:37–38); i.e., the fire issuing from the Messiah’s mouth becomes a metaphor for the Torah” (*Revelation 17-22* [WBC 52C; Dallas: Word Books, 1998] 1061).

²² R.H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 224 – 225. According to Mounce, “(T)he fire which proceeds out of their mouth to destroy the enemy recalls Elijah’s encounters with the emissaries of King Ahaziah (II Kgs 1).”

²³ G.K. Beale, *Revelation*, 511. He says further: “The rejection of their testimony commences a spiritual judgment of the persecutors and lays the basis for their future final judgment”.

²⁴ R.H. Mounce remarks that “...she will be utterly devastated by the fire of divine judgment” and that “Judgment by fire is a common Biblical concept.” “In ancient times the smoke of a burning city signaled its collapse. Once under way, nothing could prevent the spread of its hungry flames until the city was left in smoldering ruins. In the case of Rome it is the Lord God in his strength who will bring about judgment by fire” (*Revelation*, 326 – 327).

Furthermore, the events develop until God’s punishment of his opponents is described in **Revelation 18 – 20**. This happens when Babylon will be burned with fire (Rev 18:8) as well as when the false prophet and the beast are “thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur” (Rev 19:20). Gog and Magog who were deceived by the devil, will be consumed by fire that comes down from heaven, whilst the devil himself, will be “thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev 20:9-10). This motif of fire by which God’s judgement and punishment takes place, thus runs like a golden thread particularly through the Revelation of John.

2.2 God’s Fire – through his messengers: *glorification*

The radiance of God’s fiery presence is often transferred to his *messengers* (especially to angels and prophets) as intermediaries²⁵ in order to speak “with God’s tongue”.²⁶ In Isaiah, for instance, the seraph took a coal with a pair of tongs from the altar (ἄνθρακα, ὃν τῆ λαβίδι ἔλαβεν ἀπὸ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου, Isa 6:6) and touched the mouth²⁷ of the prophet Isaiah (ἤψατο τοῦ στόματός μου, Isa 6:7). During the long, covenantal relationship with his people, God continued to use different mediators to communicate his expectations and instructions to them. Most common amongst these were especially the prophets. Particularly Elijah and the Lord’s “messenger” in Malachi 3 are two figures who are not only closely associated with fire, but who are described as being fire themselves.²⁸

a. *Elijah – the “prophet like fire”*

The wisdom book of Sirach calls Elijah²⁹ “a prophet like fire” (προφήτης ὡς πῦρ, 48:1), whose “word burned like a torch” (ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ³⁰ ὡς λαμπὰς

²⁵ D.L. Petersen also draws attention to the intermediary role of prophets (“Defining Prophecy and Prophetic Literature”, in M. Nissinen [ed], *Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context. Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives* [Atlanta: SBL, 2000] 33-44, here 37-38).

²⁶ D.L. Petersen identified “at least five basic forms of prophetic literature: divinatory chronicle, vision report, prophetic speech, legend, and prophetic historiography” (“Defining Prophecy”, 41). In this study it becomes clear that the theophanies by way of fire imagery is particularly closely connected to the element of “prophetic speech”.

²⁷ Cf. J. Morgenstern: “(it) purged the prophet of all evil and defilement and qualified him to hear and to converse with the Deity” (*Fire*, 6).

²⁸ For the influence of Mal 3 in the New Testament in this regard, see J. Proctor, “Fire in God’s House: Influence of Malachi 3 in the New Testament [1 Cor 3:1; 1 Peter 1:6-7],” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (1993) 9-14.

²⁹ The explicit reference to Elijah’s name here lacks in the Hebrew text and is only present in the Greek.

³⁰ The Hebrew reads the plural (וירבדו) for this phrase (ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ).

ἐκαίετο, 48:1). He “three times brought down fire” (κατήγαγεν οὕτως τρις πῦρ, 48:3) and was “taken up by a whirlwind of fire, in a chariot with horses of fire” (ὁ ἀναλημφθεὶς ἐν λαίλαπι πυρὸς ἐν ἄρματι ἵππων πυρίνων, 48:9).³¹ According to the account of the Elijah-narrative in 4 Kgdms 1:10-12, Elijah only twice states at two sequential scenes that “if he is a man of God” (εἰ ἄνθρωπος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐγώ), that fire from heaven should come down and consume the delegations of the captains of fifty and their men (καταβήσεται πῦρ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ καταφάγεται,) – which happens then in both instances (in the latter even explicitly being called the “fire of God” only in the MT: **אֵשׁ-יְהוָה**). When Elijah then finally meets with the king, he conveys God’s message: “Thus says the Lord” (Τάδε λέγει κύριος, 4 Kgdms 1:16). Again the motifs of fire imagery and that of prophecy are interjecting and closely connected with each other.

But the real “fire test” for the presence and power of Elijah’s God, was seen on Mount Carmel with the fire that came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice: “Then the fire of the Lord fell (καὶ ἔπεσεν πῦρ παρὰ κυρίου ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench” (3 Kdmgs 1:38). Elijah put the test earlier to the Baal worshipers: “the god who answers by fire is indeed God” (καὶ ἔσται ὁ θεός, ὃς ἐὰν ἐπακούσῃ ἐν πυρί, οὗτος θεός, 3 Kgdms 1:24). Not only does the fire become the proof of God’s existence and power, but also the sign of an open channel of communication between Elijah and God.

Given the close connection between the ministry of Elijah and the motif of fire, it is thus not surprising that at the end of his days, Elijah is taken up into heaven when “a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them (*Elijah and Elisha, GJS*), and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven” (4 Kgdms 2:11).

Motifs from the Elijah narrative abound in the New Testament.³² Especially Luke’s Gospel relies heavily on elements of the Elijah narrative for its

³¹ For a detailed discussion on Sir 48 – 49, see R. Hildesheim, *Prophet, op. cit.*; here especially pp. 92-93.

³² Cf., for instance, the study of D.M. Hoffeditz, “A Prophet, a Kingdom, and a Messiah: The Portrayal of Elijah in the Gospels in the Light of First-Century Judaism”, Unpublished PhD dissertation: University of Aberdeen, 2000. Hoffeditz states that “Only YHWH is equated with ‘fire’ in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is described as the embodiment of fire (e.g., Exod 24. 17; Deut 4. 24; Isa 30. 27-30; and Ezek 22. 20-21), the source of fire in terms of judgment (e.g., Lev 10. 21; and 2 Kgs 2. 11). No place in the Hebrew Scriptures is a prophet, a king, or even a priest described in such terms” (p. 21). This needs closer refinement: firstly, YHWH as fire is not only limited to the *Hebrew* Scriptures, but also in the Greek LXX translation; and secondly, the Lord’s “messengers” are not pictured themselves as fire, but the Lord’s presence is mediated by these messengers through fire imagery, e.g. Ps 104:4..

presentation of the Jesus narrative. It would be appropriate here, however, to focus only on the Johannine literature, particularly on the Revelation of John. At least two elements in Revelation remind of the Elijah motif: (a) It is reported that Jezebel, the chief persecutor in the Elijah narrative, now calls herself a prophet (Ἰεζάβελ, ἡ λέγουσα ἑαυτὴν προφῆτιν, Rev 2:20),³³ and (b) that the second beast would “perform great signs, making fire to come down from heaven” (ἵνα καὶ πῦρ ποιῆ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβαίνειν Rev 13:13) – who “as a false Elijah ... prepares the way for a false Messiah”.³⁴

b. Messengers as angels like fire

The most well-known occurrence in this regard where reference is made to angels, or messengers, that are made to be fire, is found in Ps 104:4: “you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers”. Aune calls this “an important passage in view of the association with the seven spirits of God with seven torches of fire in 4:5” and says that “In an explanatory gloss in 4:5, the seven torches of fire burning before the throne are interpreted by John as the seven spirits of God.”³⁵ It is also later quoted in Heb 1:7: “Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire’”. A similar reference is found at the beginning of Ezra’s prayer in 2 Ezra 8:21-22: “(O Lord, you who inhabit eternity), before whom the hosts of angels stand trembling²² and at whose command they are changed to wind and fire, whose word is sure and whose utterances are certain...”.

In Malachi, too, the qualities, or functions, of the Lord’s “messenger” (τὸν ἄγγελόν μου, Mal 3:1) connect the motifs of proclamation and fire imagery: he “prepares the way before him” (ἐπιβλέπεται ὁδὸν πρὸ προσώπου μου, 3:1); he is the “messenger of the covenant” (ὁ ἄγγελος τῆς διαθήκης, 3:1); and “he is like a refiner’s fire” (διότι αὐτὸς εἰσπορεύεται ὡς πῦρ χωνευτηρίου, 3:2).³⁶

This motif surfaces clearly in Rev 10:1-2: “And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He held a little scroll

³³ “The choice of the epithet, Jezebel, and references to fornication and eating things sacrificed to idols indicate a first-century parallel with the wicked queen of Ahab who fostered in Israel the idolatrous worship of the Canaanite Baal (I Kgs 16:29 ff; II Kgs 9:30 ff)” (H.R. Mounce, *Revelation*, 102).

³⁴ H.R. Mounce, *Revelation*, 260.

³⁵ D.E. Aune, *Revelation 1 – 5:14* (WBC 52A; Dallas: Word Books, 1998) 34.

³⁶ P.B. Lee refers, for instance, to Luke 3:17, “which alludes to Mal. 3:2 and 4:1, (and which) describes eschatological purgation and judgment” (“Eschatological Figures,” 222).

open in his hand”.³⁷ At other places in the New Testament, the radiance of God’s glory is noted when his messengers appear on earth – very similar to what happened with Moses whose face was shining when he came down from Mount Sinai (Exod 34:29). The most striking New Testament examples are probably to be found in the empty tomb narratives. In Mark’s Gospel a “young man in a white robe (νεανίσκον ... στολήν λευκήν) sat at the right side” (16:5). In Matthew’s version “an angel of the Lord” came from heaven, whose “appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow” (ἄγγελος ... κυρίου ... τὸ ἔνδυμα αὐτοῦ λευκὸν ὡς χιῶν, 28:2-3). In Luke’s version, “two men in dazzling clothes stood beside” the women (ἄνδρες δύο ... ἐν ἔσθῃτι ἀστραπούση, 24:4).

c. Fire and prophetic speech – voices and tongues

If fire is understood as the presence of God, then *the message* of God is closely connected with the presence of *fire*. God’s revelation through angels and prophets as messengers closely connected with the miraculous and frightening role of fire is evident from the survey above. This was noted, for instance, in the *Pentateuch* when an angel of the Lord speaks through the burning bush with Moses (Exod 3:2), or when the revelation of God’s message through the Law is received at a burning mountain (“The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire. At that time I was standing between the Lord and you to declare to you the words of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain,” Deut 5:4-5). Some *Psalms* too, captured this connection between speech and fire in statements such as: “While I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue” (Ps 39:3), or “The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire” (Ps 29:7). But the following statements in *Jeremiah* that link fire and prophetic speech³⁸ from God are particularly interesting:³⁹

- “I am now making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall devour them” (Jer 5:14)
- “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones” (Jer 20:9)

³⁷ H.R. Mounce pointed out that “Some commentators have taken the strong angel to be Christ,” but that “This identification is rejected by most because in the Apocalypse Christ never appears as an angel” (*Revelation*, 207).

³⁸ Cf. H.M. Barstad & R.G. Kratz (eds), *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009.

³⁹ “True prophecy is like fire, producing violent results (Jer 23:29); Jeremiah’s own life is a testimony of this” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The New American Bible*, 1996).

- “Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (Jer 23:29).

Also *Ezra* illustrates this connection between fire and speech when “wind and fire and a storm are coming out of his mouth” (2 Ezr 13:27). Later in 2 Ezra 14, responding to the voice that called him, Ezra is told to open his mouth and drink “something like water, but its color was like fire” (14:39) upon which his “heart poured forth understanding, and wisdom increased in my breast, for my spirit retained its memory and my mouth was opened and was no longer closed” (14:40-41).

In the New Testament, the imagery of fire and divine speech found its culminating point in the events of Acts 2 on Pentecost day when “tongues as of fire appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them” (2:3-4) – an image with similarities in Stoicism.⁴⁰

3. Conclusion

This investigation attempted to present a brief survey of the interjection between the occurrences of fire imagery and its connections with prophecy as Theophany in the Greek Old Testament and with reference to the Revelation of John. Fire imagery frequently serves as a *Leitmotif* for God’s revelatory presence. It points to God’s theophanies and is a visible sign of God’s ontological presence. The “glory of the Lord” encapsulates this fiery presence of God on earth and is a physical sign of his radiance.

The survey above made it clear that God’s presence through fire imagery is closely connected with his message as part of his divine revelation. It was established that this developed in one of two directions: sometimes with negative implications to humanity during God’s wrath and judgement, i.e. during the process of the *purification* of his creation, although at other times with positive implications to humanity during God’s mediation of his message of involvement and care, i.e. during the process of his *glorification*. The first of these, fire as a message of purification, could particularly be seen in the Revelation of John where the motif builds up to the ultimate revelation of Christ. The second of these, fire as a message of glorification, could be noticed in the

⁴⁰ Cf. J.C. Thom: “God as ordering and creative principle is physically present in all things as a fine, fiery substance, variously called the “designing fire” (*pyr technikon*) or *pneuma* (“breath” or “spirit,” a fiery form of air), which gives everything its form and internal cohesion” (s.v. “Stoicism”, in C.A. Evans & S.E. Porter (eds), *Dictionary of New Testament Background* [Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2000] electronic edition).

mediatory roles of God's messengers.⁴¹ Especially Elijah and Malachi presented clear examples of the interjection between God's revelation through fire imagery and God's prophetic message. The Revelation of John points again, as in the Elijah narratives, to the motif of fire from heaven. Furthermore, the connection between fire imagery and prophetic speech was observed in the roles of angels as God's messengers who were made like fire, as well as in the voices and tongues of these divine intermediaries that became like fire.

It can be concluded that the connection between fire imagery and prophecy can be clearly observed in the Old Testament literature and that this connection is carried through into the Revelation of John. The fact of this connection could even be summarized in the statement that the mere presence of fire often functions as the revelatory presence of God and that this in itself serves as prophecy⁴² – either as a message of purification or of glorification. In this sense, “fire as revelation” might be understood to be “fire as prophecy”.

⁴¹ Cf. H.M. Barstad: “Divination was performed in a variety of ways (auditions, visions, dreams, or other techniques), but always through an intermediary, a ‘seer’ or a ‘prophet’, a ‘priest’, or other, more ‘technical’ cultic personnel” (“What Prophets Do. Reflections on Past Reality in the Book of Jeremiah”, in H.M. Barstad & R.G. Kratz [eds], *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009] 10-32, here 27).

⁴² “Prophecy as it appears in the biblical texts (‘biblical prophecy’) is a literary construct related to the historical phenomenon of prophetic intermediation (‘ancient Hebrew prophecy’) but not identical with it” (M. Nissinen, “The Historical Dilemma of Biblical Prophetic Studies”, in H.M. Barstad & R.G. Kratz (eds), *Prophecy*, 103-120, here 114).