Notes and Observations

God as Consuming Fire

Howard Jacobson
University of Illinois, Urbana

Three times in Scripture, God is explicitly called a "consuming fire" (Deut 4:24; 9:3; Heb 12:29).[1] A few other times he is compared to a "consuming fire" (Exod 24:17; Isa 30:27, 30; 33:14[?]). The church fathers often quote or allude to this notion of God as a "consuming fire." In particular, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine do so a number of times.[2] I want here only to point out that on several occasions these words ("God is a consuming fire") are strangely misquoted and commentators refrain from discussing the peculiarity. My purpose is to call scholars' attention to this strange quotation and in addition to offer possible solutions to the problem.

In his *Hexaemeron* Ambrose, in the context of God and fire, apparently quotes our verse(s) as *God's* words, "ego sum ignis consumens" ("I am a consuming fire");[3] again, in *De officiis*, "Pater Deus dixit, ego sum ignis consumens" ("God the Father has said, 'I am a consuming fire'").[4] Jerome in his Commentary on Obadiah verse

[1]Deut 4:24, "Dominus Deus tuus ignis consumens est" ("The Lord your God is a consuming fire"); 9:3, "Dominus Deus tuus ipse transibit ante te ignis devorans atque consumens" ("The Lord your God will Himself go before you, a devouring and consuming fire"); Heb 12:29, "Deus noster ignis consumens est" ("Our God is a consuming fire").

[2]E.g., Ambrose, *de Spir. Sancto* 1.144 (CSEL 79, 76), "Deus enim est ignis consumens" ("For God is a consuming fire"); Jerome, *Ep*. 18A.6 (CSEL 54, 81), "et in Deuteronomio Deus ipse ignis scribitur esse consumens" ("And in Deuteronomy it is written that God Himself is a consuming fire"); *Apol. contra Rufinum* 2.7 (CC 79, 39), "de quo scribitur Deus ignis consumens est" ("Of Him it is written, 'God is a consuming fire'"); and many more times in Jerome. Augustine, *contra Adimantum* 13 (CSEL 25.1, 144), "Deus vester ignis est edax et deus zelans" ("Your God is a consuming fire and a jealous God"). Quodvultdeus, *adv. Quinque Haereses* 6.68 (CC 60, 291), "de quo dictum est ignis consumens est" ("Of Him it is written, 'He is a consuming fire'"). Pseudo-Augustine, *Spec*. 44 (CSEL 12, 484), explicitly quoting from Deuteronomy, "Dominus Deus vester ignis concremans est" ("The Lord your God is a consuming fire"). Elsewhere too in the early fathers, e.g., Pseudo-Augustine, *Sermo* 182.2 (PL 39, 2008); Pseudo-Ambrose, *Sermo* 49.4 (PL 17, 705); Hilary of Poitiers, *Tract. in Ps*. 118.8.9 (CSEL 22, 428).

[3]*Hex.* 4.3 (CSEL 32.1, 117).

[4]*Off*. 3.106 (PL 16, 175).

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18 writes of God, "qui dicit ego sum Deus ignis consumens" ("He says, 'I am God, a consuming fire'").[5] Similarly, Augustine has God declare, "ego sum ignis consumens [edax]" ("I am a consuming [devouring] fire").[6] Quodvultdeus *Liber Promissionum* has God assert, "ego sum ignis vitia . . . consumens" ("I am a fire that consumes vices").[7] In other words, several church fathers, even those who at some places quote our biblical verses accurately, namely "Deus est ignis consumens" ("God is a consuming fire"), quote the verses as first person assertions by God, namely, "ego sum ignis consumens" ("I am a consuming fire"),[8] a statement never found in the Bible.[9]

How are we to explain this (repeated) aberration? One contributory factor may have been contamination between our Deuteronomic verses and the episode of the burning bush in Exodus 3. In that episode (the angel of) God appeared to Moses in a fire from a bush. God then addresses Moses, "I am the God of your father." Perhaps the first-person address by God together with the fiery context and the verses in Deuteronomy combined in Ambrose's mind to produce "I am God, a consuming fire." We should note that the quotation in the *Hexaemeron* comes out of the context of the burning bush.[10] Ambrose wonders how to reconcile the story of the burning bush (God's fire does not consume the bush) with the verses from Deuteronomy stating that God is a consuming fire. And this possibility seems a bit more enhanced by the fact that elsewhere, too, Ambrose seems to conflate the bush scene with the Deuteronomic verses. Thus, we have the curious and apparently contradictory statement by Ambrose: "ipse dixit, ego sum ignis ardens et non consumens" ("He said, 'I am a fire that blazes and does not consume'"),[11] in which the Deuteronomic assertion is rephrased to suit the context of Exodus 3 (note that "ardens" is the Vetus

[5]*Comm. Obad*. 18 (PL 25, 1113).

[6]*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 1.64 (PL 32, 1337); *Retractationum libri II* 1.6.5 (PL 32, 593); compare *Contra Adimantum* 13 (CSEL 25.1, 146).

[7]*Liber Promissionum* 1.46 (CC 60, 55). Angels, of course, are frequently fiery (e.g., the seraphim). Also, Satan declares ἐγὼ πῦρ ἐκ πυρός ("I am fire from fire") in *Gos. Bart.* 4.54.3 (Nachrichten Göttingen 1897).

[8]Commentators on these passages routinely cite Deut. 4:24, without taking any note of the fact that the biblical passage is in the third person, not first person. See e.g., B. Roland-Gosselin, *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae (Oeuvres de Saint Augustine*, vol. 1, Paris: Desclée, De Brouwer, 1949) 229; J. J. Savage, *Saint Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise and Cain and Abel* (New York: The Fathers of the Church Inc., 1961) 133; I. J. Davison, *Ambrose: De Officiis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 2:882.

[9]Sometimes the first person version actually comes with an explicit assertion that it comes from the Old Testament, e.g. Augustine, *Mor. Eccl.* 1.64. There is a rabbinic text (*Tanḥuma Terumah* 11) which presents a dialogue between God and Moses, in the course of which God declares, ואני אש אוכלת ("I am a consuming fire"), i.e., "ego sum ignis consumens" (a quotation of Deut 4:24 is then appended). This seems of no relevance to the problem in the fathers.

[10]*Hex*. 4.3.

[11]*Exp. Luc*. 7.132 (CSEL 32.4, 339). The language is exactly that of the rabbis who referred to the fire at the burning bush as אש בוערת ואינה אוכלת (*Exod. Rab*. 2.10), "a fire that burns but does not consume."

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Latina's word at Exod 3:2). Also, Ambrose elsewhere dramatically recreates the bush scene and has God say explicitly (to the hypothetical believer), "ego ignis . . . ut tua peccata consumam" ("I am a fire in order to consume your sins").[12]

On this explanation, we will probably assume that the first-person version was then picked up from Ambrose by the later fathers.

But another factor, perhaps the central one, in the shift from third person to first person should be noted. I suspect that the inclination to treat the assertion that God is a consuming fire as a first-person declaration is a reflection of the currency in the early Christian world of some such declaration on divine lips. That is to say, that in early Christian circles there circulated a statement attributed to God (or Jesus) identifying himself with fire.[13] And the fact is we have just such a statement. Origen quotes Jesus, "ait autem ibi Salvator, qui iuxta me est iuxta ignem est" ("There the Savior said, 'Who is near to me is near the fire'").[14] This is quoted in Didymus, ὁ ἐγγὺς μοῦ ἐγγὺς τοῦ πυρός ("Who is near to me is near to the fire");[15] elsewhere Origen has a slightly different variation, "memento quod scriptum est, qui approximant mihi approximant igni" ("remember what is written, 'They who come close to me come close to the fire'").[16] In other words, there circulated a "saying" of Jesus in which he identified himself with fire. We now know that this saying of Jesus was already incorporated in the *Gospel of Thomas* 82, where the Coptic has the same text as the Greek and Latin quoted above, "He who is near me is near the fire."[17] And beyond this, a newly uncovered work dubbed the *Gospel of the Savior* expands this saying and immediately prior to "whoever is close to me is close to the fire" adds, "I am the blazing fire" (compare "ego sum ignis consumens," "I am a consuming fire").[18]

[12]*Ep. extra collectionem* 14.42 (=*Ep*. 63) (CSEL 82.3, 257). Such conflation between the Deuteronomy verses and the bush scene may be seen in Hilary of Poitiers, too, who writes of God, "postea et Moysi esse ignis ostenditur" ("Afterward He is shown to be a fire to Moses too"), referring to the bush scene where, however, there is no identity asserted between God and the fire (*Trin*. 12.46 [CC 62A, 617]). As if to make it evident that Hilary is also thinking here of the Deuteronomy verses, a few lines later (12.47) he alludes to them clearly: "Deus qui ignis consumens est" ("God, who is a consuming fire").

[13]The interchangeability here between God and Jesus is apparent in Ambrose (*Off*. 3.106) where, after attributing "ego sum ignis consumens" ("I am a consuming fire") to "Pater Deus" ("God the Father"), he proceeds to add "ipse quoque Dominus Iesus quasi ignis inflammat" ("The Lord Jesus Himself also burns like a fire").

[14]*Hom. Jer.* 3.3.

[15]*Psalmenkommentare aus der Kateneüberlieferung*, ed. E. Mühlenberg, vol. 2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977) 168, ad Ps 88:8.

[16]*Hom. Lib. Iesu* 4.3.

[17]See Bentley Layton, ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7* (2 vols.; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989) 1: 84–85.

[18]Although the parchment is a bit lacunose here, it seems apparent that this is essentially the sense and wording of the Coptic text. See Stephen Emmel, "The Recently Published *Gospel of the Savior*," *HTR* 95 (2002) 57. See also the editio princeps by Charles W. Hedrick and Paul A. Mirecki, *Gospel of the Savior* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1999) 40–41.

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With respect to this, we ought to note that sometimes when the fathers quote the Deuteronomic verse (either in the first- or third-person versions), they understand it not of God but of Jesus. Thus, Augustine writes, "ipse Christus loquitur etiam in vetere testamento cum dicit, ego sum ignis edax" ("Christ himself speaks also in the Old Testament, when he says, 'I am a devouring fire'").[19]

One final piece of evidence supports the notion that the Deuteronomic verses were interwoven by the fathers with a Jesus-saying that identified him as fire. In a striking passage in Caesarius's *Libellus de Mysterio sanctae Trinitatis*,[20] the Jesus-saying and the Deuteronomic verses are explicitly brought together and we are told, of God, that "de patre . . . scriptum est Deus ignis consumens est et illud qui appropinquat mihi appropinquat igni" ("About the Father, it is written, 'God is a consuming fire' and also the saying, 'He who comes near to me comes near to the fire'"). It is but one very small step from this to "ego sum ignis consumens."*

[19]*Contra Adimantum* 13; note also, e.g., Pseudo-Ambrose, *Sermo* 49.4; Pseudo-Augustine, *Sermo* 182.2.

[20]Ed. Morin, p. 178.

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