

## Excerpts from Prof. Chávez's "A Theological Introduction to the Christian Bible" Relevant to Purification by Fire

What Mal then prophesies is that Yahweh is indeed coming, and that his way will be prepared by a "messenger" or angel. In both Hebrew and Greek, the same word means both messenger and angel. Some think that this book was originally anonymous, but was attributed to Malachi, meaning "my messenger," from Mal 3:1. Yahweh, or more exactly, the *Lord* (in Hebrew, it is not the Tetragrammaton or four-letter divine Name YHWH that is used here, but *adon*, the word for "Lord"), will come to his Temple, and will purify the "sons of Levi" (the Levites), so that they may offer acceptable sacrifices; this sounds like an eschatological reversal of the Zadokite passage in Ezek 44:10-14. It will be a terrible time of purification with fire, of sifting and refining as is done with metals. But then the sun of justice will shine from above (cf. Luke 1:78). Finally, the assumed-into-heaven prophet Elijah is identified as the messenger or precursor of this great and terrible day of Yahweh, and from then on all pious Jews awaited his coming as the harbinger of eschatological deliverance (preceded by a painful but necessary cleansing). Stegemann has called this last section of Mal 'John the Baptist's vocation narrative'. Note how many times "fire" appears in the Matt and Luke accounts of the Baptist's preaching.

Secondly, 1 Enoch has a "preterhuman" view of sin (Sacchi). Sin is not due originally to human fault, but has a cosmic origin; it is due to the primal sin, the sexual intercourse between angels and humans related in Gen 6. The world is profoundly defiled, impure, because of this; it is under the dominance of evil spirits. The Flood was only a superficial cleansing; a cleansing by fire would be needed.<sup>1</sup> This is in line with the deep pessimism of apocalyptic: the world is in such a bad, utterly corrupt state, that only a new creation by divine intervention will suffice to remedy it. Mere reform has been proven to be inefficacious. Where were the effects of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, or the other covenant of Deut 28/29, or the new heart of Ezek 36? Clearly, all that had

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<sup>1</sup> See GABRIELE BOCCACCINI, *The Roots of Rabbinic Judaism, An Intellectual History from Ezekiel to Daniel* (Grand Rapids – Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2002), 91. Note the theme of fire in the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt 3/Luke 3), and this theme as well as the omnipresence of evil spirits requiring exorcism in the ministry of Jesus. Cf. Eph 6:10-13; Col 2:15. One could also point to Jesus' cleansing or purification of the leper in Mark 1:40-44 and of the woman with the blood flow in Mark 5:25-34; menstruation rendered very impure (see Lev 20:18). Purity was of enormous concern to the "Enochians," but they did not see the solution in the Temple cult. Cf. John the Baptist's non-Temple baptism "unto the forgiveness of sins." Jesus' "cleansing of the Temple" was really a symbol of its destruction. More on this later.

been done after the Exile consisted of temporary, half-way measures. Devout Jews of the Enochic type expected, demanded, needed, much more.<sup>2</sup>

What John the Baptist seems to be doing is calling Israel to *return* to God (the *shuv* verb), that is, to repent or convert confessing their sins, being baptized (bathing or being washed) as symbolic of final purification (see Ezek 36:24-29). This will result in the new heart that finally obeys God, or at least, it is a preparation to receive this new condition. John comes proclaiming “a baptism of repentance *unto* the forgiveness of sins” (in Greek, *báptisma metanoías eis tēn áphesin hamartiōn*), not forgiveness itself; that is, it prepares you for the final judgment (by fire, as in Mal 3), after which you are declared or found to be righteous, and thus “forgiven” and saved.<sup>3</sup> One is coming after John who is mightier and who purifies with fire, not mere water. This the Christians applied to Jesus. Note that fire purification was expected in Mal 3, Dan 11-12 and the Enochic literature. Cf. the combination of water and fire in Isa 4:4-6.

Jesus identified himself with the Servant of Isaiah, who suffered and carried (expiated) the guilt of others. I think this was what the voice he heard clearly intimated, and I think that it was part of the “messianic package” as delivered to him in his baptism (combining redeemer figures, including the Chosen One and the Servant of Isaiah, as in 1 Enoch); see Luke 12:49-50, where there is reference both to the purification by fire the world needs and to Jesus’ “baptism” (now understood as his Passion).

Jesus was thus baptized, and experienced God’s revelation that he was God’s only/beloved Son and also the Servant of Isaiah. This sacrificial mission, seen as the purifying baptism of fire which would finally cleanse the earth as the Flood had not done, issued in God’s vindication of the one who had taken the Curse upon himself: the Resurrection. The Church is born out of its experience of this saving event . . .

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<sup>2</sup> Both 1 Enoch and Qumran will depict a “heavenly, eschatological high priest commissioned to cleanse the polluted earth;” NICKLESBURG, *1 Enoch 1*, 54. In 1 Enoch, it is the archangel Michael (which some associate with the Danielic Son of man); in Qumran, 11QMelchizedek, it is Melchizedek, “portrayed as a divine hypostasis,” (Rabbi) JOSEPH M. BAUMGARTNER, “Messianic Forgiveness of Sin in CD 14:19 (4Q266 10 I 12-13),” in *The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Technological Innovations, New Texts & Reformulated Issues* (D.W. Parry – E.W. Ulrich, eds.; Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill Academic, 1999), 537-544.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. HARMUT STEGEMANN, *The Library of Qumran. On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist and Jesus* (ET of 1993 German orig.; Grand Rapids – Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans; Leiden – New York – Köln: Brill, 1998), 220. The late Prof. Stegemann’s book has had a profound influence on my understanding of Jesus’ eschatological ministry, as reflected here.