

The God That “Answers By Fire”

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Abstract

The paper elucidated Elijah’s prayer of fire invocation in the book of 1kings chapter 18:18-40. During a contest at Mount Carmel, Elijah the prophet, who was representing Yahweh, Israel’s God, challenged 850 prophets of Baal and Ashterah. The God/god who responded by bringing down fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice on the altar was to emerge the true God. Using the historical-critical method of analysis, Elijah’s prayer was analyzed. The paper in addition to exploring the meaning of Elijah’s prayer and its theological basis also investigated the theological basis of the Holy Ghost fire prayers. Elijah’s prayer was used as a comparative and evaluator prayer formula for analyzing the Holy Ghost fire prayer. The paper finally revealed that in prayer, God should be given the prerogative of determination of fate, and the enforcement of his sovereignty should be solicited for. A properly articulated prayer should be devoid of selfishness. Holy Ghost fire prayer formula is characterized by its spontaneous and judgmental nature. The paper considered the fact that a more positive application of the Holy Ghost fire in prayers

will lead to an advancement of the mission of the church. The paper finally argued that the Holy Ghost fire acts as a phenomenon for cleansing, for empowerment of believers and for revival but not for destruction.

Introduction

In the most derogatory way, a passenger shouted at a Lagos coaster bus driver “if you don’t stop me now ho-----ly gho-----st fi-----re”. An echo of fire followed behind from other passengers in the bus with an outburst of laughter. This driver versus passenger episode is one of the numerous ways that people make jest of Holy Ghost fire in prayers and conversations. Sequel to this incident, a bus preacher who had just concluded his gospel message made some invocations of the Holy Ghost fire to burn a catalogue of problems. The Bible in the book of 1 Kings chapter 18, records how Prophet Elijah invoked fire from heaven. Elijah however did it for no other reason than to determine the all powerful and true God to whom Israel ought to pay allegiance to. This prayer of Elijah probably has given rise to novel interpretations and a new form of fire prayer” in the 21st century worship branded Holy Ghost fire prayer. It is a common feature for Holy Ghost fire to be invoked in our prayer meetings and most times used to deal with stubborn issues. “Holy ghost fire” is regarded as the most efficacious type of prayer. This pattern of prayer has overshadowed other patterns of prayer known in the Old Testament such as penitential prayer, Supplication prayer, prayer of intercession and thanksgiving prayers to mention but few.

The idea of invoking fire to attack seeming enemies is done so frequently and indiscriminately that it has become a phenomenon of concern to the Church. The conception of this paper arose as an avenue of seeking an explanation for the use of Holy Ghost fire in prayers. This paper therefore will attempt to address the

problem of whether the concept of Holy Ghost fire is ideal or an aberration.

The paper is guided by the following objectives: to examine the meaning and theological implications of Elijah's prayer; to explore and properly articulate the concept of Holy Ghost fire; to draw a line of demarcation between the God that answers by fire and the Holy Ghost fire prayer formula. The final aim of the paper is to address the contemporary Church with the lessons drawn from Elijah's prayer. To achieve these set objectives, a historical-critical method of research will be adopted. The history in the text and the history of the text will be interpreted. By the use of a comparative method, the nexus between the two forms of prayer under review will be established.

Elijah and the fire of God

Elijah (e-li-ja) my God is Jehovah was a Hebrew prophet and a Tishbite. The prophet emerged abruptly in the scene like Melchizedek of the patriarchal times. Elijah prophesied during the time of Ahab and Ahaziah. Ahab the 7th king of the Northern Kingdom provoked God's anger more than any other king of Israel before him. He married Jezebel a Phoenicia princess who introduced the Phoenician religion on the most extensive scale¹. The worship of Yahweh was substituted with Baal worship. Baal worship was a worship of strength and power. Its obnoxious and evil nature led to the persecution and slaying of the prophets of Jehovah. It seemed to Unger that the last remnants of true worship were about to perish at the time Elijah emerged². In fact, Ahab's twenty-two years of kingship was characterized by polytheism and spiritual compromise. Elijah as his name implied had a burning passion for the worship of Yahweh. He not only challenged the absurdity of worshiping both Baal and Yahweh but made prophetic denunciations of this unacceptable religious practice. Elijah did not end at fighting and condemning Baal worship but emphasized Israel's covenant responsibility of total

commitment to their God. Israel has ever since the time of Joshua been hurling between two opinions.

Elijah decided to put an end to this dual worship. His defence for true and sole worship of Yahweh was climaxed at the Mount Carmel contest. The demand placed on the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah was for them to get their god to answer by fire. Elijah's God was also challenged to answer by fire. Any of the gods who answers by fire – that means who devoured the sacrifice with fire emerged as the true and only God to be worshipped henceforth. Hence he declared, "The God who answers by fire – he is God."

Elijah's ministry was characterized by demonstration of fire. No prophet in the Old Testament made use of "fire of God" like Elijah. Elijah prayed "I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire, he is god (1Kgs 18:24)". The motivation of this prayer was to solve a lingering problem of dual commitment – partly to God and partly to Baal. This problem needed a definite solution. It was a battle of gods – between the gods of Phoenicia and the Yahweh of Israel. The test was very clear and unequivocal³. The God who answers by fire – he is God.

Fire was used as yardstick for determining the true God. Fire was not invoked in this instance as punishment. The fact remains that there can only be one omnipotent, infinite and all sufficient God. It was bad for Israel to be mixing Baal worship and the worship of God. If God emerges as the true God, Baal must be dropped but if Baal triumphs, then the people should reject God. If at the end none of the gods answers, then the people can turn atheists⁴.

Why did Elijah insist that the true God must answer by fire and not by rain or any other thing? The idea of answering by fire appears very logical and symbolic. Fire was known both in Israel and among the primitive peoples as something of

supernatural origin. Fire was good as the determinant factor of true worship because fire stands as a phenomenon that reveals god's presence and scholars like Gabriel Abe⁵, and Kevin Youngblood⁶ subscribe to this view. God did not choose any other means to reveal his presence to Moses but fire (Ex. 3:2-4). He led the Israelites in the wilderness through a pillar of fire (Ex. 13:21). God confirmed his visit to Manoah by a sign of fire (Jdg. 13:20). All through the law, God used fire to consume sacrifices and to prove his acceptance of certain sacrifices (Jdg. 6:21, Lev. 9:24, I Chron. 21:26). God is so closely linked with fire both to establish his presence and to judge his adversaries that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes him as a **consuming fire** (Heb.12: 29). Elijah's proposal and option of fire was therefore appropriate for the contest. By requiring God to appear by fire, all prejudice and misunderstanding was erased. For Baal prophets, fire element was ideal because of their belief and the worship of Apollo, the sun god, and god of fire⁷.

Fire was a cleansing agent used for purging and purification. At the time of this contest, the land of Israel was in dire need of cleansing because it has been defiled by idolatry. Matthew Henry argued that though there was need of rain because of the drought at the time, there was more need for fire to consume the sin offering so that Israel would be relieved of any calamity⁸. He further opined that the God who can send fire can also give rain at the appropriate time.

Though the Old Testament cannot provide a clue to the association which existed between Elijah's prophetic ministry and his constant use of fire, a certain degree of inference can be drawn. It is possible that Elijah has a special divine endowment to the use of fire and this distinguishes his ministry. Elijah made use of fire more than any other prophet in the Old Testament. He was known for bringing down fire not only at Mount Carmel (1kgs. 18:38) but also on the fifty men sent by Ahaziah to arrest him (1kgs. 1:10). At the end of his earthly ministry, he was

taken up to heaven by a chariot of fire (1Kgs. 2: 11). Elijah was a prophet of fire. He seemed to have it at his disposal and at his slightest request.

Fire fell

Elijah stepped forward and prayed, “O lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord are God and that you are turning their hearts back again” (1Kgs 18:36-37).

Elijah was concerned about God’s name and desired that people may know that God is God in Israel. The main thrust of his prayer was the preservation of true worship in Israel. He prayed to discredit Baal and exalt the name of Yahweh. God sent down fire to show approval to the passion and concern Elijah had for His name. The fire that came down consumed the sacrifice. The special thing to note about this fire of Yahweh *yahaaowh’esh* was that it was an extra-ordinary fire⁹. Its supernatural origin was proven by the extent of the devouring, which the fire did. This fire went beyond burning the sacrifice to burning both the stone, the base of the altar and even licked up the water in the trench. The process and style of the burning was unique, it burnt from up and downwards¹⁰. The downward process proved that the fire did not come from under the altar and upwards.

By answering with fire, God gave an indubitable and tangible proof that God is God and Baal is impotent¹¹. God’s consumption of sacrifices with fire was a common phenomenon in Israel’s life and worship. When Solomon finished the temple, he prayed at the temple dedication and God sent down fire from heaven to consume the burnt offering and the sacrifices...(2nd Chron. 7:1). The sin offering and the burnt offering presented to God by Aaron were consumed by fire from the presence of the Lord (Lev. 9:24). God consumes sacrifices with fire as a proof

of his acceptance of the sacrifices. In Elijah's case, he consumed both the sacrifice and the altar with its base. Henry attempted an explanation of this peculiarity of burning.

The nature of the burning probably conveyed a message. The altar was burnt because although God accepted the sacrifice for this purpose, he will not accept sacrifices on this same altar subsequently. This was a pointer that altars in the high places be demolished. Israel should focus on Jerusalem from then and not the high places. The spontaneous answer by fire produced a unanimous approval by all and sundry who gave their verdict – **Jehovah he is God.**

Holy Ghost Fire Prayer: An Aberration of Elijah's Prayer

Holy Ghost fire prayers are prayers in which the Holy Ghost is invoked to consume some unpleasant and stubborn problems. It is charismatic and aggressive in nature. This prayer form is most commonly witnessed in the Pentecostal circles, deliverance circles and sometimes in the mainline churches. A typical Anglican church based in Lagos and which is known as a frontline in deliverance adopts this prayer formula. Holy Ghost fire and the refrain bu-----r --nnn is chanted many times in her deliverance services¹². This new trend of prayer has swept through our modern worship in this 21st century. There is a charm and efficacious aura attached to it. People find it more appealing to their needs and a greater percentage of worshippers are attracted to it.

People resort to Holy Ghost fire prayer when faced with challenging situations and purported cases of witchcraft are obvious. Attestations were made by Dominion¹³ and Ekene¹⁴ to the instant and automatic relief they had when they used the Holy Ghost fire to deal with witchcraft harassments. Marwick came up with the report that Africa's preoccupation with witchcraft beliefs has increased in modern times¹⁵. Marwick as it were has

hit the nail on the head. This increase in the belief in witchcraft attack must be a logical explanation of the indiscriminate uses of this prayer pattern in our Churches in modern times. Majority of people both within and outside the Christian circles believe that there is an unprecedented increase in witchcraft manipulations and attacks unlike in the past. Inexplicable occurrences abound and these subject people to fear and insecurity. Holy Ghost fire prayers formula is regarded as suitable prayers that match such satanic operations and humanly inflicted problem. In the African cosmology, there is the belief that the world is infested with spirits. These spirits are sometimes malevolent¹⁶.

Before the Christian church came up with her solution, expiatory sacrifices were the escape route for this uncomfortable situation. Now the church has provided the prayer solution and this appears to be an acceptable option.

The Holy Ghost and Fire

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity is the one through whom God exercises his power. David Yongicho has given him an appropriate description as God's executive agent in the world today¹⁷. According to Faussets, *ruach* (Hebrew Spirit) is used in Ps 51:11, and Isaiah 63:10-11. The Greek *pneuma* is the same for the Holy Spirit and Holy Ghost¹⁸. Holy Ghost was the common name for the Holy Spirit in English prior to the 20th Century. The original meaning of the English word "Ghost" paralleled the word spirit or soul¹⁹. The Holy Spirit though in scripture is presented as gentle, is also understood in Christianity as the spiritual force of God²⁰. Associating the Holy Spirit with fire did not occur in many references as to compare with the references to the fire of God. Strongs recorded that fire was used up to 548 times in the entire Bible²¹.

In many cases, fire was associated with God rather than the Holy Spirit. It is apparent that God works in the flame of the Holy Spirit. This flame of the Holy Spirit performs a purifying duty. Gabriel Abe in fact, presented *ruach* (Spirit) as the purifying

agent of Yahweh²². He argued that in relation to the Holy Spirit, fire is just one of the symbols²³. The Holy Ghost baptizes people with fire (Mtt. 3:11). The fire of the Holy Spirit is usually released to purge, purify and empower believers for divine service/s.

Abuse of Holy Ghost fire in prayers

The fact that must be stated clearly is that the fire of God still remains as God's instrument of judgement. In our modern time, God can still send down visible fire as he did at the Mount Carmel contest. Neither God nor his principles have changed. This fact notwithstanding, there are glaring evidences that the church has misunderstood and misinterpreted the theological basis of the prayer of Elijah. What obtains in our modern churches is a radical shift from the divine ordination of prayers. Prayer should fundamentally be Theocentric and not anthropocentric. Unlike the prayer of Elijah, Christians (people in the church) now pray with self-gratifying motives. Elijah's focus in his prayers was for the preservation of God's name and integrity. In our modern churches, the fire of the Holy Ghost is not invoked to purify, purge and thereby save sinners. Holy Ghost fire is arbitrarily invited to strike one's enemies and thereby reducing the Holy Ghost fire to a retaliatory weapon of destruction. The Church must learn from the example of Jesus, the head of the Church.

Jesus set a glaring example by turning down the suggestion of the sons of Zebedee who wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans.

The Samaritans had resisted Jesus from entering their city. For Jesus, this was not a good occasion for the display of charisma. (Luke 9: 54&55). He added " the son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them ...". The Holy Ghost is dispatched in prayer as an errand boy to pursue people's offenders. Most times these prayers are said for personal gratification and display of charisma. Holy Ghost fire prayer

becomes an aberration of Elijah's prayer when it is indiscriminately chanted. The Christian ought not to pray as the heathens do, whose style of prayer Jesus condemned for their vain repetitions (Mtt. 6:7). This was the case of the prophets of Baal who repeatedly called Baal to answer them. It is common to notice the mockery and disdain with which people talk about the Holy Ghost fire. It is used at the slightest provocation. If however the Holy Ghost fire is invoked to cleanse a sinner and transform such a person, it is a prayer in the right direction.

God that Answers by fire and how it speaks to the modern Church

When Elijah called on the God who answers by fire to prove his overriding ability, he sought to defend God's interest. The content of the prayers in 1Kgs 18:36ff revealed a theological principle.... That "the people will know that you O Lord are God...." Elijah intended that when God answers by fire, the people will effortlessly submit to God as the sovereign one. In prayer, it is the will of God that should be done and not the will of man. Jesus exemplified this in the Garden of Gethsemane when he pleaded that God's will, not his own will be done (Mtt. 26:39). The church and the Christians must learn to accept prayer as a forum through which God's will is sought and not the will of man. The church has lately concerned herself more with the judgment of the wicked than in salvation and restoration of sinners and backsliders. The gentle spirit-led prayers have left the church. The church is meant to groan for the land where sin and wickedness has become the order of the day. It is through praying the right prayers that vindication will come for the poor and the less privileged.

Elsie Mckee gave an analysis and amplification of 1Tim. 2:1-4 and there exegeted on Calvin's clarion call for praying for "all people who dwell on earth"²⁴. From the text, it is obvious that the primary charge on whom and what to pray for are explained in no clearer term than in these words of Paul. "I urge, then, first of

all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth” (1Tim. 2:1-4).

Elsie in his review of Calvin’s teaching that Christians should pray for all people further observed, that: “God has given us a definite form of prayer that we might ask for nothing human, nothing worldly”²⁵.

Conclusion

Obviously, the church has devalued the prayer of repentance and intercession and has embraced and enthroned warfare prayers. Less or no emphasis is placed on Paul’s charge in 1Tim chapter 2 verses 1-4. That the church should pray for kings, rulers and all who dwell on earth.

The exegesis of Elijah’s prayer portrays the lapses in our prayers in modern times. The church and the Christian seek their interest and not God’s interest. The salvaging role of the church to humanity must be exercised through prayer. When the church prays according to the principles in the Book of Timothy, there will be peace in our land. Joy Dawson challenged the modern church to intercede and explains intercession as the privilege of every Christian. She insisted that a dividing line cannot be drawn between witnessing and intercession because as Jesus mandated the church to preach, so He mandated her to pray also²⁶. Emmanuel Kure warns that Christians should not be quick to engage in warfare without first settling the standard for the war. When David fought Goliath he challenged him in the name of the Lord of hosts, and the battle ended in David’s favour. Kure therefore warns.

“Anytime a situation comes against you as a believer, do not hastily say, the blood of Jesus, I rebuke you in Jesus name, I cast

you out! etc. This is not the right approach to spiritual warfare. It may not eventually achieve the desired victory. The basis of your relationship with God must be declared for a battle to be won²⁷.

If the church prays with the motive to honour the name of God, the church will continually triumph. If the need arises to invoke the Holy Ghost fire such need will be to cleanse the impurities in people's lives with the flame of God's fire, which is the Holy Ghost fire.

When the Holy Ghost is employed to burn unwanted satanic deposits in order to produce a transforming effect in people's lives, such prayer goes in conformity with the scriptural prayer principle. Again, Holy Ghost fire can be requested in prayer to quicken revival in individual lives and the Church. The church needs the fire of the Holy Ghost to empower, and equip her for greater service.

The Holy Spirit is sent to the church to exert more positive influence on her. The church abuses his role and relevance when she subjects Him to the work of a destroyer and retaliatory force. Let the church henceforth turn her "Mount Carmels" of churches and prayer centres to places where the heathen²⁸ submissively proclaims, "Jehovah, he is God".

¹McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia in www.biblesoft.com 1988-2004.

²Merrill F. Unger, Unger's Bible Dictionary, www.biblesoft.com 1988-2004.

³Charles F. Pfeiffer, The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, (Chicago, Moody Press) 332.

⁴Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible Complete Unabridged, U.S.A., Hendrickson Publishers (2006)

⁵Gabriel Abe (ed.) Symbology and Symbolism of Ruach: A divine Onomatopoeia in the Old Testament in Journal of

Religion & African Culture, Vol. I No. I, Ibadan, Daystar press (2005) 15

⁶Kevin Youngblood, Fire in Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Nashville, Holman Publishers, (2004) ,575 & 576.

⁷W.L. Walker in Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary www.biblesoft.com 1988-2004.

⁸Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible, Complete Unabridged, U.S.A., Hendrickson Publishers (2006).

⁹Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament www.biblesoft.com 1988-2004

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹David & Pat Alexander, The Lion Handbook to the Bible, Lion Publishing (1992) 266.

¹²The Healing of Deliverance unit in St. Barth's church Aguda, Surulere, Lagos, Holy Ghost fire is a prayer formula very commonly used in the Deliverance team.

¹³Pastor Dominion is a vibrant pastor of the Prevailing Word Assembly in Nsukka. He approves the use of Holy Ghost fire in prayer, 2008.

¹⁴Ekene gave a report of the delivering effect of Holy Ghost fire October 2009.

¹⁵Marwick, in Mircea Eliade (ed.), Encyclopedia of Religions, New York, Macmillan Publishing Co. (1987) 428.

¹⁶Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes, The Problem of Interpretation*, Ibadan Claverianum Press, Ibadan (1985) 38.

17 David Yongicho, Holy Spirit my senior partner, Christ Crusaders Quality Press, Umuahia, (1989) 7.

18 Faussets, www.biblesoft.com 2000.

19 enwikipedia free encyclopedia/ Holy Ghost.

20 In Encarta dictionary1993-2008,the Holy Spirit is described as God's spiritual force. In Genesis 1:2 Holy Spirit worked upon the earth which was formless and empty and by his power brought order into the universe.

21. James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers (1995) 462-465.
22. Gabriel Abe (ed.), *Symbology and Symbolism of Ruach : A divine Onomatooeia in the Old*
23. *Testament press Journal of Religion & African Culture*, Vol.1, No.1, Ibadan, Daystar (2005) 15.
Ibid.
24. Elsie Mckee, *Interpretation*, [http:// www.accessmylibrary.com/ article-IGI-19](http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-IGI-19)
25. Ibid.
26. Joy Dawson, *Thrilling and Fulfilling*, YWAM Intercession Publishing, U.S.A (1997).
27. Emmanuel Kure, *Practical Prophetic Prayer and Warfare (pulling down the strongholds)*. Rehoboth Publishing, Lagos, (1999) 4.
28. Heathen is used here to mean those who do not believe in God and not in a derogatory sense.