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ESCHATOLOGICAL FIRE AS A SOTERIOLOGICAL CATEGORY: SALVATION THROUGH FIRE AND THE HOPE OF UNIVERSAL RESTORATION IN PATRISTIC THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT:

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES THE THEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF ESCHATOLOGICAL FIRE AS A SOTERIOLOGICAL CATEGORY IN EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT, WITH PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO THE NOTION OF SALVATION THROUGH FIRE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HOPE OF UNIVERSAL RESTORATION. BEGINNING WITH A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF PRE-CHRISTIAN, PAGAN CONCEPTIONS OF COSMIC PURIFICATION, THE STUDY SITUATES EARLY CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE WITHIN A BROADER SYMBOLIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT IN WHICH FIRE OPERATES AS AN AGENT OF TRANSFORMATION RATHER THAN MERE DESTRUCTION. THE ARTICLE THEN TURNS TO THE PAULINE CORPUS, FOCUSING ESPECIALLY ON 1 CORINTHIANS 3:13–15, WHERE FIRE IS PRESENTED AS A MEANS OF TESTING AND PURIFYING HUMAN WORKS, ALLOWING FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF SALVATION EVEN IN THE CONTEXT OF ESCHATOLOGICAL JUDGMENT. THIS PAULINE FRAMEWORK IS INTERPRETED AS PROVIDING A CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION FOR LATER PATRISTIC REFLECTIONS ON PURIFICATORY JUDGMENT AND RESTORATIVE ESCHATOLOGY. BUILDING ON THIS FOUNDATION, THE STUDY EXPLORES KEY PATRISTIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE THEOLOGY OF CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND GREGORY OF NYSSA, BOTH OF WHOM ARTICULATE A VISION OF DIVINE JUDGMENT IN WHICH FIRE FUNCTIONS PEDAGOGICALLY AND THERAPEUTICALLY. IN THEIR THOUGHT, ESCHATOLOGICAL PUNISHMENT IS NOT RETRIBUTIVE IN A FINAL SENSE BUT SERVES THE RESTORATIVE PURPOSE OF HEALING THE SOUL AND REORIENTING IT TOWARD THE GOOD. THIS PERSPECTIVE CULMINATES IN A QUALIFIED AFFIRMATION OF APOKATASTASIS, UNDERSTOOD NOT AS A SIMPLISTIC DENIAL OF JUDGMENT BUT AS THE ULTIMATE RESTORATION OF CREATION THROUGH PURIFYING DIVINE LOVE. BY TRACING THESE TRAJECTORIES, THE ARTICLE ARGUES THAT ESCHATOLOGICAL FIRE IN EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY CAN BE COHERENTLY UNDERSTOOD AS AN EXPRESSION OF DIVINE JUSTICE ORDERED TOWARD MERCY, OFFERING A THEOLOGICAL GRAMMAR FOR CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM GROUNDED IN SCRIPTURAL EXEGESIS AND PATRISTIC REFLECTION. THE STUDY CONCLUDES BY CONSIDERING THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS MODEL FOR CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ON JUDGMENT, SALVATION, AND THE FINAL DESTINY OF HUMANITY.

KEY WORDS: ESCHATOLOGICAL FIRE, APOKATASTASIS, CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM, SALVATION THROUGH FIRE.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of salvation through fire occupies a significant place in the history of religious thought, functioning as a major theological metaphor for the process of purification and restoration of the human being and the cosmos. In the pagan religious traditions of Antiquity, fire was often understood as an ontological principle of transformation: an ambivalent element, capable of both destruction and regeneration, through which the cosmic order was renewed [1]. Within this framework, fire did not serve exclusively a punitive function, but rather a deeply therapeutic one, being associated with the cosmic cycles of universal purification and restoration [2].

Early Christianity did not reject this symbolism; rather, it engaged with it critically and reconfigured it in the light of biblical revelation. A key reference in this regard is the theology of the Apostle Paul, who introduces a language of evaluative and purifying fire in an eschatological context. The statement in 1 Corinthians 3:13–15, according to which each person's work will be tested by fire and the individual may be saved "as through fire", opens the possibility of a soteriological interpretation that goes beyond a strictly retributive framework of judgment. Fire does not nullify salvation; instead, it becomes the medium through which salvation is accomplished, even under conditions of the destruction of what is inauthentic or corrupt.

This Pauline insight was systematically developed by certain Church Fathers, particularly within the Alexandrian and Cappadocian traditions, where the theme of apocatastasis acquired a rigorous theological formulation. Clement of Alexandria interprets the divine fire as an expression of God's pedagogy: a rational and purifying fire that does not aim at punishment in itself, but at the correction and healing of the soul [3]. For Clement, judgment is inseparable from education, and fire is the instrument through which the Logos guides the human being toward perfection.

Gregory of Nyssa carries this vision to its ultimate consequences, articulating one of the most coherent theologies of universal restoration in patristic Christianity [4]. In his thought, the eschatological fire is the fire of divine love that consumes evil without destroying the personal subject [5]. Punishment is not final but transitory; its role is to eliminate unnatural attachments and to restore human nature according to its original purpose.

In the thought of Saint Maximus the Confessor, the idea of the purifying fire acquires a profound symbolic and metaphorical dimension: the fire reflects the transfiguring presence of God, and passing through this eschatological fire becomes a personal experience of the judgment of conscience. For those who have lived virtuously, the fire is a source of light and joy; for those who remain in sin, it reveals separation from God, yet with a restorative purpose, maintaining the prospect of final communion with the Creator. His vision, which integrates the concept of apocatastasis in an esoteric register after the condemnation of the idea at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, complements and enriches the understanding of fire as an instrument of universal salvation [6].

Therefore, the doctrine of salvation through fire, as it develops from its pre-Christian roots through Pauline and patristic elaborations, can be understood not as a theology of condemnation, but as a theology of eschatological hope. This perspective provides a conceptual framework in which divine justice and mercy are not mutually exclusive but converge for the final restoration of the entire creation. The present article aims to analyze this theological dynamic, highlighting the role of fire as the medium of purifying judgment and as an instrument for the fulfillment of apocatastasis.

SALVATION THROUGH FIRE IN THE PAGAN TRADITION AND THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The idea of fire as an agent of purification and restoration of the universe is ancient and widespread in pagan thought. In Greek and Stoic cosmologies, fire is not merely a physical element but a divine principle that governs the cyclical destruction and rebirth of the world. The Stoics, for example, believed that the universe passes through a cycle of burning and re-creation, and that the return of the planets to a particular configuration triggers a cosmic fire that engulfs the entire universe. This process is not chaotic but governed by a divine *Logos*—a “universal reason” that ultimately “dries up everything” and absorbs all remaining individual expressions after the fire. The Stoic concept of the restoration of the universe, called *apokatastasis* (ἀποκατάστασις) or *palingenesis* (παλιγγενεσία) [7], reflects their belief in a universal order that regenerates itself through purification and renewal [8].

The influence of earlier philosophers is evident in this concept. The Stoics adopt from Heraclitus the idea of restorative fire, which emphasizes the role of change and purification in maintaining cosmic balance [9]. According to Heraclitus, purifying fire is essential to the order and stability of the universe: all things are transformed through fire, and this transformation does not lead to total destruction but reintegrates everything into a higher order. Thus, fire becomes a symbol of regeneration and cosmic salvation, not merely of destruction [10].

This pagan vision of fire is also found reinterpreted in early Christian thought, especially in the Pauline epistles. The Apostle Paul takes up the image of fire as an instrument of purification but gives it a moral and spiritual meaning. In 1 Corinthians 3:13–15, Paul writes: “Each one’s work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved even though only as one escaping through the flames.” From this perspective, fire is no longer merely an abstract cosmic agent but a divine instrument that tests and purifies the deeds of each person. Even if a spiritual work is “burned,” the believer may still be saved, but only through a process of purification “as through fire.”

By comparing pagan conceptions with the Pauline perspective, we can observe a significant transition: for the Greeks and the Stoics, fire is a cosmological mechanism, and salvation involves harmonization with the universal order. For Paul, fire acquires an ethical and spiritual character, reflecting judgment and the inner purification of each believer. In both cases, however, the central idea remains the same: fire is not only destructive but also regenerative; it reveals truth and ensures continuity and balance – whether of the cosmos or of the human spiritual life.

This continuity between pagan and Christian thought suggests that early Christians did not completely reject universal symbols but reinterpreted them in a theological light. Fire thus becomes a universal symbol of purification and salvation: in Greek cosmologies, through the regeneration of the universe; in Paul’s vision, through the spiritual purification of each believer. In both cases, fire tests, cleanses, and restores, offering a powerful image of transformation, judgment, and hope.

THE PURIFYING FIRE AND THE PEDAGOGY OF SALVATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

In the theology of Clement of Alexandria, the idea of “salvation through fire” holds a distinctive place and has generated numerous interpretations. According to his thought, God takes delight in humanity only insofar as human beings attain salvation. Clement emphasizes that God manifests a constant and pedagogical activity toward humanity: He shows mercy,

educates, exhorts, protects, and leads toward salvation, offering, as a reward for accepting His teaching, the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven, and rejoicing in humanity only when it is saved. This perspective highlights God's uninterrupted involvement in the process of salvation, through the ordering of everything necessary for the salvation of the world, both at a general and at an individual level.

The theme of salvation through fire appears clearly in Clement's writings, especially in the *Stromata* [11]. His conception draws on multiple influences, such as Platonic philosophy and certain Jewish and Christian mystical traditions, and is intended to express the idea of purification and perfection through divine light [12]. For Clement, fire is the symbol of the transformative work of God's grace, which cleanses the soul of its impurities and leads it to a higher level of spiritual life and communion with God.

Although he speaks in traditional language about punishment by fire reserved for those who refuse a life pleasing to God, Clement does not view this reality as strictly punitive. He maintains that the divine plan of salvation is addressed to all humanity, including both the living and the departed. Thus, the fire of divine grace has a therapeutic and restorative character, offering the possibility of reconciliation and renewal to all who are willing to receive it. In this sense, Clement clarifies that this is not a material fire that consumes bodies, but a spiritual fire, capable of penetrating and purifying the sinful soul.

In describing the torments of hell, Scripture uses the Greek term *kolasis* (κόλασις), found, for example, in Matthew 25:46 and in 1 John 4:18, where punishment is associated with fear. Aristotle distinguishes between *kolasis* and *timōria* (τιμωρία), the latter denoting a punishment inflicted out of a desire for revenge or the satisfaction of personal justice, a term also used in Hebrews 10:29. By contrast, *kolasis* has a corrective and formative purpose, being applied for the improvement of the one punished. Steven Nemes notes that this terminological distinction remained valid at the time of the writing of the New Testament, which suggests that it was also known and employed by Clement of Alexandria in his theological reflections [13].

PURIFICATION AND RESTORATION: THE MEANING OF BAPTISM AND ESCHATOLOGICAL FIRE IN THE THOUGHT OF SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA

Saint Gregory of Nyssa identifies two realities external to human nature that can contribute to salvation: Christian baptism and what he calls "baptism" by fire.

The central importance of baptism in Saint Gregory's soteriological thought reflects the fundamental role of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection in the economy of salvation, with baptism constituting an indispensable condition for the attainment of salvation [14]. Gregory understands baptism as a prefiguration and preparation for the eventual resurrection and final restoration of humanity, affirming that this "great resurrection" could not take place without the prior rebirth granted by the baptismal washing, described as an initiatory act.

In the thought of the Cappadocian Father, the terms *apokatastasis* (ἀποκατάστασις) and *mystērion* (μυστήριον) stand in a relationship of conceptual equivalence. For him, *mystērion* primarily designates the mystery of the saving economy, and the sacrament of baptism is directly related to it. The "mystery of the economy" is, in essence, the mystery of salvation, concentrated in the incarnation of Christ.

If matters stand thus for the baptized, the question arises concerning the situation of those who have not received the sacrament of baptism. Gregory of Nyssa maintains that, for such persons, there exists a possibility in the life to come, since the "baptism" by fire will fulfill the purifying and preparatory function for salvation: "for since fire and water possess a certain power of cleansing, those who have been freed from the defilement of sin through the water imbued with the mystery of Baptism have no need of another purification; but those who have

not chosen to partake of such cleansing must, of necessity, be purified by fire” [15]. In this context, the fire of the age to come performs the same purifying function as the water of baptism, ensuring the cleansing from evil in cases where baptism and/or repentance and moral correction were not accomplished in the present life [16].

Gregory defines God, in accordance with the testimony of Scripture, as love, and this love is described in his conception as a consuming fire that cleanses the soul of every impurity. From this perspective, purification is not conceived as punishment, but as an act of restoring the soul to its original state of purity and communion with God, through a fire unlike that of this world.

THE PURIFYING FIRE AS AN EXPERIENCE OF DIVINE PRESENCE: THE ESCHATOLOGICAL VISION OF SAINT MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

In Saint Maximus the Confessor, the idea of purifying fire does not denote a material fire but functions as a metaphor for the transfiguring presence of God. The patristic Father interprets fire as a symbol of divine love that cleanses and transforms souls. According to him, at the end of the ages all people will pass through this fire, but its effects will differ depending on each person’s spiritual condition. For those who have lived in obedience to God’s will and have cultivated the virtues, the fire will be a source of light and joy; by contrast, for those who have remained in sin, it will be experienced as a painful burning that brings to light their separation from God [17].

When questioned about the passage in 1 Corinthians 3:13–15, which refers to this fire, Maximus replies: “As for sinners, their works are burned through the judgment of conscience, which burns the conscience; it destroys sins and saves the human person, but deprives him of the virtues he did not practice in the former time. And in the age to come, the works of sin are dissolved into non-being, nature receiving back its powers through fire and through judgment” [18].

Through these reflections, Saint Maximus the Confessor offers a profound and coherent theological vision of eternal life, one that goes beyond the simple idea of immortality and emphasizes uninterrupted and love-filled communion with God.

On the basis of the present analysis, we have sufficient grounds to argue that Saint Maximus’s eschatological perspective is distinguished from that of Origen and Saint Gregory of Nyssa by the depth and clarity with which he develops – within an esoteric register – the concept of *apokatastasis* after its condemnation at the Fifth Ecumenical Council [19]. In this context, Hans Urs von Balthasar proposes a balanced position, stating: “We must also confess, together with Christ and the Gospel, that sinners will be punished with condemnation. To reconcile this antinomy is not the task of earthly theology” [20]. Saint Maximus’s theology with regard to *apokatastasis* represents the apex of patristic thought, setting the tone for future eschatological reflection in this direction, to which certain insights born within contemporary theology will be added—insights that seek to outline, within a profoundly Orthodox vision, the current ideas and directions of the concept in postmodern theology.

CONCLUSION

The theological analysis of the purifying fire in patristic thought, from Clement of Alexandria to Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Maximus the Confessor, reveals the continuity and depth of reflection on salvation, purification, and communion with God. Clement of Alexandria emphasizes the pedagogical and restorative character of the divine fire, viewed as an expression of God’s grace that educates, cleanses, and guides the soul toward perfection. This fire is not a material punishment but a therapeutic act aimed at restoring humanity to

communion with the Creator. From this perspective, the salvific fire becomes a symbol of divine love, which shapes and spiritually transforms every human being [20].

Saint Gregory of Nyssa develops, in a systematic manner, the idea of the complementarity between baptism and the “baptism by fire”, illustrating how divine grace operates both during life and in the age to come. Baptism, as an initiation and preparation for resurrection, provides the purification necessary for salvation, while the eschatological fire completes this action where, due to the absence of baptism or through sin, full purification was not achieved. In this way, the divine fire is understood as a means of restoration, returning the soul to its original state of purity and communion with God.

Saint Maximus the Confessor offers a profound and symbolic eschatological perspective, in which the purifying fire reflects the transfiguring presence of God and the action of the judgment of conscience upon each individual. The effects of the fire depend on the spiritual condition of each person: for the virtuous, it is a source of light and joy, while for those remaining in sin, the fire reveals separation from God, yet with a restorative purpose. Furthermore, his vision of apocatastasis, developed in an esoteric register after the condemnation of this idea at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, highlights the harmonization of judgment and divine love within the economy of universal salvation.

Overall, these patristic reflections outline a coherent model of salvation through fire: not as arbitrary punishment, but as an instrument of purification, education, and restoration of the soul, achieving full communion with God. They thus provide a unified theological framework in which salvation, purification, and divine love intertwine, while also opening perspectives for deepening the concept in contemporary theology and postmodern reflection on Orthodox eschatology.

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