

Paul's Fire Theology in the Hands of Early Christians

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, as he is developing their faith through a description of a church being built, Paul addresses how materials are tested. In 1 Corinthians 3:13, Paul asserts: "...καὶ ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον ὁποῖόν ἐστὶν τὸ πῦρ αὐτὸ δοκιμάσει,"¹ which signals Christian connection between πῦρ and δοκιμάσει. Later theologians provide interpretations of 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 which influenced developing Christianity. This paper establishes interpretations of Paul's use of πῦρ, consistently translated as "fire", and δοκιμάσει, which is more open to analysis based on context, with various definitions such as: "prove", "tested", "approved", "examined", and "found fit". This vocabulary analysis looks into the meaning of these two words for Paul and investigates to what degree fire was applied in an eschatological sense in 1 Corinthians 3:13 and 3:15.

In 1 Corinthians 3:13, Paul writes: "ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον φανερόν γενήσεται· ἡ γὰρ ἡμέρα δηλώσει, ὅτι ἐν πυρὶ ἀποκαλύπτεται, καὶ ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον ὁποῖόν ἐστὶν τὸ πῦρ αὐτὸ δοκιμάσει." "The work of each will become manifest; since the day will demonstrate, because it is revealed in fire, and what sort of each person's work is, the fire itself will prove."

In order to determine whether Paul envisioned a sense of purgatory when he spoke of judgment by fire in 1 Corinthians 3, let us examine parallel instances of the Greek noun for fire. As we will see in passages from the 4th and 11th century, for example, Paul's use of fire found its way into various interpretations. For Aelfric, writing an 11th century passage that is a description of the end of life, fire is cleansing. Aelfric built up the power of fire to extend from testing, proving, and saving (as we see in the original Greek) all the way to purging. Conversely,

for Ambrosiaster in the 4th century, Paul's fire fueled his explanation of purgatory. If early Christians interpreted Paul's words to mean that man will be tested by fire and suffer judgment, a severe picture of eschatology appears.

Forms of the verb δοκιμάζειν appear three times in Paul's 1 Corinthians. The third person singular imperative is used in 1 Corinthians 11:28: "δοκιμαζέτω δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτόν, καὶ οὕτως ἐκ τοῦ ἄρτου ἐσθιέτω καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ποτηρίου πινέτω..." This appears to be an evaluative meaning of δοκιμάζειν, and not connoting any testing or final judgment. The final appearance of this verb does not occur within an eschatological context. In 1 Corinthians 16:3, Paul writes: "ὅταν δὲ παραγένωμαι, οὗς ἐὰν δοκιμάσητε δι' ἐπιστολῶν, τούτους πέμψω..." These two external uses of δοκιμάζειν support an argument that Paul intended no purgatorial sense of πῦρ αὐτὸ δοκιμάσει in 3:15. Since there are other verbs that Paul uses to express judgment, his choice to use δοκιμάζειν then denotes a specific meaning. The meaning of δοκιμάζειν in 1 Corinthians 3:13 should then not contain God's judgment. Moreover, if πῦρ is the subject of the verb then it cannot be a sentient action. For example, the idea of fire casting judgment does not make complete sense. Fire testing, however, makes more sense because fire has the ability to test materials. The correct definition we apply to the verb δοκιμάσει will also inform our selection of the direct object. The accusative noun, τὸ ἔργον, many scholars have taken to refer to each man and not only the work of each man. Whether we were to take δοκιμάσει to mean test, judge, or refine, will make varying degrees of sense when applied to man's work or man himself.

The intent of judgment portrayed by Paul could have greatly affected early Christian doctrine concerning eschatology and God's end-of-life judgment. While we will never be true arbiters for the meaning of the original Greek words, by looking at how those Greek words were originally translated into Latin and within other instances of early Christianity build a fuller

picture of how Paul was understood in antiquity. “Purgatory in late antiquity arose from late antique culture and its understanding of the Bible, patristic writings, visionary literature, and the history and the authority of the church. As such, Christian purgatory was a late antique idea and, to some extent, a late antique invention.” (Moreira 2010, 5). As time unfolds and those Greek and Latin translations get used throughout history, Christian doctrine was being built on the foundation of the words of scripture, and later, the words of scriptural commentaries.

Bibliography

Moreira, Isabel. *Heaven's Purge: Purgatory in Late Antiquity*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2010.