

In an age of self-aggrandizement, it is refreshing to hear John say to the anxious and expectant crowd, “Wow, hold on, I’m not the one who is going to rock your world. I only baptize with water, but the one who is coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit *and* fire. I am not worthy to untie his sandals.”

Anyone who baptizes with fire is no relativist. He is not a laissez-faire, whatever will be will be, long-haired, sandal wearing remnant from the 60’s. He believes in good and evil to a drastic degree. Francis Spufford colorfully describes Yeshua (Jesus), as having a vivid, horrified sense of the human proclivity to foul things up.

He seems to think a change is required as complete as the change that comes when chaff is set blazing after the harvest and the fields billow with flame. We must be “salted with fire,” he says.

Whenever anyone asks him about the law, he ups the ante towards a perfectionistic impossibility, in which anger is forbidden as well as murder, in which desire can be as much of a betrayal as adultery—in which internal states of being that apparently don’t hurt (or even affect) anyone else weigh as heavily with God as external acts.

He talks as if righteousness is almost unachievable, yet still compulsory. What is required seems to be something that it would take feats of absurd unlikelihood to accomplish, tears or openings or transformations in the order of nature, so that camels can climb through needle’s eyes!

He annoys people when he talks like this. The implication of his perfectionism is that everybody is guilty, nobody gets to congratulate themselves, and murderers and adulterers cannot be shunned. They do not belong in a category of unclean persons that the clean rest of us can hold at arm’s length.

Yeshua insists that being unclean is the normal human condition. In fact, when someone calls him good, he snaps “Only God is good.”

Yet he seems weirdly unbothered about sex, except to make it clear that it falls under the umbrella of his perfectionism. He expresses no opinions whatsoever about homosexuality, abortion, promiscuity, contraception, clerical celibacy, virginity at marriage, or how far you should go on the first date.

He appears to be opposed to divorce on the pro-feminist grounds that it cuts women off without economic support. (In his world, men can divorce women but not the other way

around.) Whether he has any passions of his own, and what kind, and who for, no one has been interested in telling us, any more than they have bothered to say what he looks like.

On the other hand, he has a *lot* to say about self-righteousness, which he compares, not very tactfully, to a grave that looks neat and well cared for up top but is heaving with “corruption” down below. For him, being sure you are a righteous person comes precious close to being dead.

If you won't hear the bad news about yourself, you condemn yourself to the maintenance of an exhausting illusion. *The evil done knowingly is rather rare compared to the evil done by people who're sure that they themselves are good, and that evil is hatefully concentrated in some other person, some other ethnicity or race, some other nationality, some other religion.*

Yeshua arrives in town just as a public execution is about to take place. The criminal is a woman “taken in adultery,” which could mean that she's been caught having sex with someone other than her husband. If this is the case, where is the other party?

It could also mean she smiles at soldiers when she serves wine to them, or that she's been seen chatting at the well with a boy who is neither her brother nor her cousin; or it could mean that she works in the brothel the town is ashamed it possesses, and has been servicing five officials a night for decades.

One way or another she has concentrated in herself the town's fear and alarm about desire. And the good people have gathered to punish her. They already have in their hands the rocks the law stipulates, neither too small nor too big, which will crack her bones and mash out of her flesh the disturbance of her desirability.

Yeshua intervenes, which is not necessarily a very sensible thing to do, when self-righteousness is breathing fast and looking forward to this kind of treat. He asks what she has done. They tell him. Oh, he says. Well then, the one of you who's never wanted anything bad had better throw the first stone.

He raises his eyes and waits, and something in the gaze of his ordinary eyes makes the good people shuffle where they stand. There's a pause. Perhaps it helps that his friends have walked into town with him, equally dusty from the road, and that among the ragtag of his followers, male and female, who're hanging back to see what he does, there are some quite large and burly men.

Anyway, there is the sound of stones dropping onto the ground, the executioners slink away, and in a moment or two only the woman is left there with Yeshua and his friends. She is weeping. He helps her to stand up.

This kind of thing does not make him popular, nor does his persistent refusal to show any respect for people's sense of their spiritual accomplishments. The usual custom, when a preacher is doing well out on the circuit, is for him to accept an invite from a pious local dignitary: someone upstanding, a pillar of the meeting-house, a bit of a connoisseur of the finer points of the law, who will feed the rising star, and in return get a private performance of whatever the new thing is he's offering, as after-dinner entertainment.

Yeshua, it seems, prefers to eat and drink with tax collectors and prostitutes. When he does accept a meal from the upright, he has a way of being casually, intimately offensive to his host. So tell me, teacher—says a solid citizen as the remains of the baked eggplant are cleared away—what must I do to be saved?

Yeshua's gaze slides across the tapestries, the silver bowls for washing guest's feet, the candlesticks blessed by the Chief Priest of the temple himself. I'd get rid of this lot for a start he says. People bristle.

No one is standing in line to be baptized with fire. This fire incinerates the chaff we have taken for wheat, chaff we have stored in the ever bigger barns we build to secure our lives against death. This unquenchable fire burns these barns to the ground, freeing us from illusions of grandeur, from the need to be greater than our neighbor.

This baptism of fire also purifies all that is of value in us as a refiner's fire purifies silver and gold. This fire frees us to know ourselves and to know others, to love ourselves and to love others. This fire frees us to walk more lightly upon the earth.