

Perpetual Fires in the Jerusalem Temple through a Mediterranean Perspective

Regularity, Eternity, Exemplarity

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Received 27 March 2023 | Revised 28 September 2023 |

Accepted 10 December 2023 | Published online 22 April 2024

Abstract

The fires of the Jerusalem temple altar were said to be perpetual. Various writers from the fourth century BCE to the third century CE added explanations and perspectives to this practice: the argument that the fire came from heaven, that it continued even during the destruction of the temple, or that it remained lit only when the high priest was righteous. Though these texts are well known, they were never examined in a comparative context: how special were these practices and discourses in their Mediterranean and Persian contexts? Maintaining a perpetual fire on the altar or lamps was a known practice in Mediterranean sanctuaries. The discourses surrounding these fires, developed especially by Greek and Roman writers of the first century BCE and the first century CE, are in many ways similar to those in the Jewish texts. I will consider in detail the differences and similarities and their significance.

Keywords

fire – ritual – perpetuity – Jerusalem temple – Delphi – Plutarch – altar – menorah

1 Introduction

Fire played a central role in ancient ritual, in both private and public religious spaces.¹ In parallel, it featured in mythological and theological discourses, and was associated with divine epiphany, revelation, and favor, but also with divine anger and punishment.² Nevertheless, the various and shifting features of cultic fire are only partially studied in scholarship. Specifically, the question of the existence of perpetual fires, that is, ritual fires which were kept burning continuously even when this was not practically required, and especially the meanings ascribed to these fires, is little studied.³ In this article, I will investigate the practice and discourse of perpetual fires in the Jerusalem temple, where it clearly had a central role, especially through a comparative analysis of similar practices and discourses in the ancient Mediterranean and in Persia. This research is one pole of a project on the place of fire rituals in the shaping of ancient time discourses.

According to many texts from Leviticus onwards, the temple in Jerusalem featured two perpetual flames: the menorah in the inner sanctum, and the fire on the large external altar, used for sacrifice. These fires became a central motif in Jewish literature, especially with the diffusion of the symbol of the menorah. However, notions of perpetuity and eternity have a history: they develop over time, with different cosmological, historical, and theological meanings and significance in different periods. In this article, I will investigate these perpetual fires from the biblical texts to the rabbinic texts of the third century: first, to examine when they started to be practiced, and then to analyze the development of the discourse and meanings attributed to them. Then, I will provide a broad comparative perspective by examining to what extent perpetual fires were maintained in Persian, Phoenician, Greek, and Roman sanctuaries, and, when relevant texts are available, how writers understood these fires.

1 Burkert, "Jason, Hypsipyle"; Neer, "Amber, Oil"; Mugelli, "Flame"; Nilsson, "Lampen"; Parisinou, "Light of Gods."

2 Edsman, *Ignis*; Grant, "Fire."

3 Important exceptions are Malkin, *Religion*, 114–134; König, "Zur Frage."

2 Jerusalem

2.1 *Pre-Hellenistic Texts*

2.1.1 The Altar Fire

Leviticus has two different commandments regarding the altar fires.⁴ Leviticus 1, concerning a private holocaust offering, speaks of first slaughtering the victim and sprinkling its blood on the altar, and then mentions lighting the fire: “The sons of the priest Aaron shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire” (the same injunction repeats several times in this chapter and the next). Thus, it would appear that there is no fire burning on the altar while the first ritual actions are occurring, and that the fire is ignited in the middle of the ritual. Leviticus 6:12–13, however, describing the morning public sacrifice, says that the fire should be kept burning on the altar at all times, so that it only needs replenishing with wood, not reigniting: “The fire on the altar shall be kept burning; it shall not go out. Every morning the priest shall add wood to it, lay out the burnt offering on it.”⁵ Leviticus 6 emphasizes that the fire on the altar “should not go out” (לֹא תִכְבֶּה), and adds that it is a perpetual fire (אֵשׁ תָּמִיד) (Lev 6:5–6). While Jacob Milgrom says that this means the fire should be kept burning continuously,⁶ Victor Hurowitz argues that תָּמִיד means “‘over and over,’ while ‘*lo tichbeh*’ is simply hyperbole and refers only to when the Tabernacle is standing,” since the detailed instructions for packing and unpacking the tabernacle include no provision for keeping the fire lit.⁷

Beyond practical concerns, it is probable that the injunction to keep the fire burning reflects first of all the required abundance of sacrifice, but also the continuous presence of the divine in the tabernacle, even if not in the fire itself.⁸ Leviticus specifies that the altar fire came “from before YHWH” with the institution of the tabernacle (Lev 9:24). The precise locative meaning of this phrase is not made clear, but the inner sanctum is the most reasonable candidate.⁹ In the Elijah cycle, “YHWH’s fire fell and consumed the offering and the wood and the stones and the earth ...,” as proof for divine presence and favor (1 Kgs 18:36–39); though the divine fire presumably fell from heaven, this

4 For the importance of burning the sacrifice in Leviticus, see Eberhart, “Neglected Feature.”

5 See Sagiv, “Leviticus 1 and 6”; Mali, “Priestly Instructions.”

6 Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 388–389.

7 Hurowitz, “Ancient Israelite Cult.”

8 For various opinions on this question, see Simone, *On Fire*, 178–180.

9 Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 590.

is not explicit. Heaven as the source for divine altar fire first occurs in Chronicles (fourth century BCE). The Chronicler adds fire from heaven descending upon the altar at the institution of Solomon's temple (2 Chr 7:1–3), as well as at the altar built by David in the place of the future temple (1 Chr 21:26). In both cases, heavenly fire is lacking in the parallel narratives in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings.¹⁰

2.1.2 The Menorah

Exodus and Leviticus emphasize the perpetuity and regularity of the lampstand lights; however, they require their lighting only at night:

2 Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil of beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly (נר תמיד). 3 Aaron shall set it up in the tent of meeting, outside the curtain of the covenant, to burn from evening to morning before the Lord regularly; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. 4 He shall set up the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before the Lord regularly (תמיד).

Leviticus 24:2–4 (trans. NRSV)¹¹

The LXX translation for these verses underlines this by translating the word תמיד in verse 4 as “until morning” (ἕως τοῦ πρωῒ). It is unclear whether the “regular lamp” (נר תמיד) of verse 2 is the same as the plural נרות appearing in verse 4; that is, whether a separate lamp is envisioned which is not the menorah, or if all the lamps burn on the same utensil. In any case, there is no lamp which burns perpetually, day and night.

In 2 Chr 13:11 the burning of lamps on the lampstand every evening by the Jerusalem priests (together with the other daily cultic acts) is an argument for the significance of the Judeans against the Israelites; it is unclear here whether the lamp is regularly lit or perpetual. A hint for a perpetual lamp is found in Chronicles' narrative of Hezekiah's reinstitution of the temple (2 Chr 29), where King Achaz is said to have “closed the doors of the vestibule, and put out the lamps, and have not offered incense or made burnt offerings in the holy place to the God of Israel.” Note the difference between lampstand and altar fires: the former is extinguished while the latter are not lit (or at least no offerings are performed); this indicates that the lamps are typically burning.

¹⁰ See Kislev, “Role of Altar.”

¹¹ Exod 27:20–21 is shorter, especially lacking the last verse.

2.2 *Hellenistic-Era Texts*

2.2.1 The Altar Fire

Later readers—Philo, Josephus, the Temple Scroll, and the Aramaic Levi Document—took Lev 6 as the dominant version, since in their descriptions of the holocaust offering they do not mention the igniting of fire, presumably because it was considered to have already been burning. The Aramaic Levi Document (early second century BCE), for example, does not mention any igniting of the fire, and moreover explicitly reverses the order found in Lev 1 by requiring that blood from the offerings be sprinkled on the altar only after the offering of wood (“And when you have offered up any of these woods upon the altar and the fire begins to burn them, you should then begin to sprinkle the blood on the sides of the altar”).¹² This occlusion of Lev 1, where the fire is not perpetual, and the preference of Lev 6, indicates that the interpreters of the temple ritual in the Hellenistic and Roman periods were interested in underlining the perpetual or eternal nature of the fire.

Hecataeus, cited by Josephus, says that in the temple “there is an altar and a lampstand. Both are golden ... Upon these is a light (φῶς) that is never extinguished, night or day” (ἀναπόσβεστον καὶ τὰς νύκτας καὶ τὰς ἡμέρας).¹³ Thus he places the everlasting light/fire not on the external sacrificial altar but on the internal one which was used mostly for incense, together with the lampstand. This interpretation may derive from practice, or from the biblical text which speaks of the incense altar as *tamid*, “regular” (Exod 30:8, LXX: ἐνδελεχισμού).¹⁴ However, while Hecataeus is known to have lived in the fourth century BCE, some argue that the quotations in Josephus are pseudoepigraphical and were written in the late second century BCE.¹⁵

If the same fire continued on the altar, it could still be seen as divine. It is unsurprising that the narrative of continuity of the altar fire was especially important in times of re-institution of the worship, such as in the second century BCE. In a much-analyzed text, the writer of the letter opening 2 Maccabees relates that the altar fire was maintained in secret in liquid form as *naphta* in Persia during the temple's destruction and desecration, and was then transported back to Jerusalem for the Second Temple.¹⁶ This fire was miraculously

12 ALD 8.1, trans. Greenfield et al., *Aramaic Levi Document*, 83.

13 Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.198. See Hachlili, *Menorah*, 176–178.

14 For this lexeme in the LXX, see Daniel, *Recherches*, 252–267.

15 Bar Kochva, *Pseudo-Hecataeus*.

16 2 Macc 1:19–22; 10:3; Schwartz, 2 *Maccabees*, 133–134, 151–154; Wacholder, “Letter from Judah”; Goldstein, 2 *Maccabees*, 157–176; Duggan, “Rediscoveries,” 211; Doran, *Temple Propaganda*; Simon-Shoshan, “Past Continuous”; Coetzer, “Old Fire.” Tg. Ps.-J. Songs 6:2 claims

lit by Nehemiah when poured out on stones and the sun shined on it, and its miraculous nature was recognized by the auspices of the Persian king. Somewhat surprisingly, the renewed dedication of the altar by the Maccabees themselves (2 Macc 10:3) is not explicitly said to be miraculous, but is probably linked back to the fire of Nehemiah since it was produced by “igniting stones,” presumably the same stones of the first story.¹⁷ The letter underlines the importance of the continuity of the sacred fire for legitimizing the Second Temple, perhaps against claims that it was illegitimate because no heavenly fire had descended on it in the dedication.¹⁸ It also links the Jerusalem altar fire with Persian customs of perpetual fire.

A fragmentary portion of the Genesis Apocryphon in the Dead Sea Scrolls (10:12) also speaks of perpetual fire (נֹר עֹלָמָא) burning immediately after Noah’s ark descended on Ararat, presumably connected to the altar erected by Noah.¹⁹ This is a singular tradition but, considering the locale of the Ararat, it may be linked to contemporary traditions, some cited and discussed below, of sacred and perpetual fires maintained in eastern Anatolia and Persia.²⁰

In the late first century BCE, Philo considers the fire on the altar as “a symbol of gratitude” to God which should be everlasting, as God’s gifts are everlasting and unceasing (*Spec. Leg.* 1.285–286). Furthermore, Philo suggests that “the lawgiver designed by this command to connect the old with the new sacrifices, and to unite the two by the duration and presence of the same fire by which all such sacrifices are consecrated.” Thus, for Philo the role of the permanent fire on the altar is temporal—it connects all the sacrifices on the altar together, even when there is no other sacrifice. All sacrifices are “consecrated” by this

that heavenly fire descended also at the institution of the Second Temple. Among the Samaritans, lack of (heavenly?) altar fire was also considered a sign of historical decline: Samaritan Chronicle, ch. 41: “the light which had shone forth in the temple departed, and the Divine fire which had not been separated from the offerings upon the two altars was taken away; and decline was perfected in them.” Compare Julian, *Contra Galilaeos* 343C–D, who cites a Christian argument that sacrifice is no longer possible because fire does not descend from heaven, and counters that this happened only to Moses and Elijah, and a very similar argument in John Chrysostom, *Adv. Jud.* 6.11.7.

17 For interpretation of the stones mentioned here, see Goldstein, *2 Maccabees*, 378; Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 376.

18 See, e.g., Bohak, “Aseneth’s Honeycomb,” who argues the letter is a repost to the temple of Onias.

19 See Fitzmyer, *Genesis Apocryphon*, 153.

20 The precise place of Ararat was not clear; in late ancient and early medieval sources, some identified the ark’s resting place with Mt. Qardu/Judi/Cudi, a mountain much closer to Mesopotamia than the peak of contemporary Mt. Ararat itself. See Harrak, “Tales.”

permanent fire. Furthermore, the fire is essentially sacred because of its divine origin, and therefore it has the power to consecrate the offerings.

Philo and Josephus both concur with the divine origin of the altar fire, and were attentive to the details of the biblical description. Philo describes at length how the miraculous fire at the tabernacle altar came from

out of the inmost shrine, whether it was a portion of the purest possible aether, or whether the air, according to some natural change of the elements, had become dissolved with fire, on a sudden a body of flame shone forth, and with impetuous violence descended on the altar and consumed all that was thereon.

PHILO, *Mos.* 2.154 (trans. adapted from Yonge)

Philo explains that human fire, used for warfare, is contaminated by bloodshed, requiring divine fire for purity; therefore God “rained down celestial flame from heaven.” He thus vacillates between heaven and the holy of holies as the source for the fire, integrating the different biblical accounts.²¹ Following the Stoics, who saw lightning as both a divine prodigy and a natural occurrence, Philo integrates the natural with the miraculous explanation: the two options given for the creation of fire come from Greek science: Anaximander claimed that air becomes fire when rarified (DK 13A5), while Anaxagoras (frag. A84 Curd), says that lightning occurs when the fiery aether penetrates the lower air.²²

Josephus says that the fire on the tabernacle altar kindled of its own accord and “appeared like fire from a bolt of lightning,” but does not specify its exact origin (*Ant.* 3.207), while the scene at Solomon’s temple institution is more dramatic and is directly dependent on the narrative of Chronicles: “fire came running out of the air (ἐξ ἀέρος διαδραμόν), and shot upon the altar, in the sight of all” (*Ant.* 8.118).

The emphasis on the pure origin of altar fire is reminiscent of Plutarch’s description of the relighting of Greek altar fires from mirrors, directly from the pure sun (discussed below). Plutarch also provides a similar description of the ignition, says that the concentration of the sun’s rays causes the air to be “rarified,” with the “sun’s rays acquiring the substance and force of fire.” Beyond this

21 Among both Aristotelians and Stoics, aether was some kind of heavenly fire. For Philo’s reception of these theories, see Long, “Philo on Stoic Physics”; Philo, *Plant.* 1–8.

22 Both options are discussed in Aristotle (*Metaph.* 2.9, 369a–b) and Seneca (*Nat.* 2.12–59). For divinatory and natural explanations among the Stoics, see the discussion in Seneca, *Nat.* 2.49–50; Cicero, *Div.* 1; Struck, *Divination*, ch. 3; specifically on lightning and divination; Weinstock, “Libri Fvlgvrales”; Williams, *Cosmic Viewpoint*, 295–334.

similarity, however, the description in both Philo and Josephus of the air as the source of divine fire is unusual in Greek or Roman descriptions of miraculous combustions, and is also not otherwise present in the Jewish sources. Lightning is typically a negative prodigy, requiring expiation.²³ It would appear Josephus either knew this description from Philo, or both adopted it from an unknown source.

2.2.2 The Menorah

In the Second Temple period a tradition developed that the fire on the lampstand is not only regular but perpetual. One of the acts of Antiochus IV against the Jewish cult, according to Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE), was to “put out the lamp, called by them immortal (ἄθάνατον), which burns continually (ἀδιαλείπτως) in the temple” (34.1).²⁴ Diodorus’ comment accords with that of Hecataeus cited above. This idea of a perpetual light may be connected to the menorah appearing in Zech 4; the angel interprets the seven lamps as “the eyes of god, which range through the whole earth” (4:10). These “eyes” are probably the seven planets, which, of course, are perpetual fixtures of the heavens (though they can be seen mostly at night). The idea that the menorah lamps represent or parallel the heavenly bodies and other divisions of cosmic time (seasons, decans, planets, the zodiac) appears in Josephus and Philo at length.²⁵ However, it is significant that despite its obvious significance for discerning and marking time, perpetuity or eternity does not figure in the elaborate construction of the cosmic symbolism of the lampstand in Second Temple authors.

While Hecataeus and Diodorus appear to affirm the significance of the “immortality” of the lamps in the eyes of Jews, two sources indicate otherwise. The first is 2 Maccabees; as mentioned above, this book constructs an elaborate narrative about the perpetuity and continuity of the altar fire. At the same time, the lampstand is only briefly mentioned at its reinstatement by the Maccabees, together with the incense altar and the shewbread table (2 Macc 10:1–3). Surely, if the perpetuity (or even regularity) of the lamps was so well known and important, some miracle concerning the lamps, or at least some description, would

23 But see Caecina in Seneca, *Nat.* 49.3: lightning may show that Jupiter is coming to eat sacrifices together with humans; and Rev 13:13, where fire coming down from heaven is a positive sign.

24 Diodorus may be using here an account by Posidonius of Apamea; see Berthelot, “Poseidonios d’Apamée.”

25 Philo, *Mos.* 2.105; *QE* 2.71–81; *Her.* 216–229; Josephus, *B.J.* 5.217; *Ant.* 3.144–145. Cf. Rev 2:1. For these ideas see Goodenough, “Menorah.” For the temple as a symbol of the cosmos in general, see Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice*, 111–144; Pena, “Wearing Cosmos.”

have been included in this narrative as well. The second is Philo. Philo explains that the lampstand is lit only at night, and provides three reasons: (a) because the lampstand is like the stars, which shine at night; (b) so that some sacrifice will be performed in the temple at all times, as the lighting of the lamp should also be called a sacrifice; (c) as a sacrifice on behalf of those who are asleep. Like the ordered cosmos, the temple functions as a unit. Neither the altar nor the lampstand burn all the time; rather, both are needed in order to cover day and night. However, Josephus (*Ant.* 3.199) who was presumably better informed of temple practice, says that three lamps (why three?) burned through the day, while all the lamps burned at night; elsewhere, Josephus says Solomon dedicated a lampstand to the temple “so that it will be lighted every day” (*Ant.* 8.90). Thus, until Josephus only non-Jewish sources speak of the perpetuity of the lamp, while Jewish sources either ignore or contradict this option; for Josephus, the lamps do burn at all times, but this is not a focus of his narrative.

2.3 *Rabbinic Texts*

2.3.1 The Altar Fire

The rabbis agree that a fire must be lit before the sacrifices, and indeed add more fires to burn on the main altar—two logs burnt every morning to fulfil the commandments of Lev 6:5 to burn wood every morning, the main fire of the altar to burn offerings, and a fire to produce coals for the inner altar.²⁶ Thus for the rabbis fire became a central part of the temple service. Furthermore, even menial daily work connected to the altar fires, such as disposing of ashes every morning, is highlighted in the Mishnah.²⁷

As opposed to 2 Maccabees, the rabbis, who were much less supportive of the Hasmoneans, undermine the narrative of continuity between the First and the Second Temple. Recognizing the altar fire's original divine source, rabbinic sources of the second century say this fire was lost with the destruction of the First Temple, along with the holy spirit of prophecy and other symbols of divine presence,²⁸ or even earlier, in the time of Manasseh. However, the rabbis argue that human fire is also required, even when heavenly fire is present:

“And the sons of Aaron the Priest shall put fire on the altar”: Even though the fire descends from heaven, it is commanded to bring [also?] man-

²⁶ M. Yoma 2.5; Sifra Tzav 1.1–2.

²⁷ See Balberg, *Blood for Thought*, 191–195.

²⁸ B. Yoma 21b: “these are five things present in the First Temple but lacking in the Second: the ark with the *kaporet* and the *keruvim*; fire; and *shekhina*; and the holy spirit; and the Urim and Tummim.”

made fire. The fire which descended in the time of Moses remained on the copper altar until they came to the eternal house (i.e., the Jerusalem temple); the fire which descended in the time of Solomon remained on the burnt offering altar until the time of king Manasseh.

Sifra Nedava 5.10²⁹

The insistence on the importance of human input is a general feature of rabbinic ritual and legal theory, but here it serves to lessen the significance of the (lack of a) long-term connection to the original, mythical heavenly fire of the First Temple. This idea may be a response to detractors of contemporary Jewish ritual, such as Christians, who may have argued that the Second Temple did not have a divine presence.

In the third century, the rabbis further claimed that Moses' altar still stood next to Solomon's stone altar, and that it continued to emit divine fire towards the offerings on the stone altar, or that the fire visited both altars.³⁰ The Second Temple, however, was a different story. Even though it also featured some signs of divine favour in semi-miraculous continuity of the altar fire and the menorah lamps, these waned in its later days:³¹

While Simeon the Just was living, the Western lamp kept burning; when he died, they went and found it extinguished. From this time on, at times they found it extinguished, at times lit. While Simeon the Just was living, the altar fire kept burning; after it was put in order in the morning, it went on burning all day ... and they only added to it the two logs with the evening tamid ... when he died, the power of the altar fire weakened, and they added wood all day long.

T. Sota 13.7

A different tradition claims that the waning of the lamps did not occur with the death of Simon the Just but forty years before the destruction of the temple, as an omen (together with others) for what was to happen.³²

²⁹ This text is cited also in b. Yoma 21b; b. Eruvin 63a.

³⁰ B. Zev. 61b. See further Rabinowitz, "Sources."

³¹ T. Sota 13.7; y. Makot 2.6, 32a; see Tropper, *Simeon*, 196–198. For the rabbis' attitudes towards the Hasmoneans, the Second Temple, and its officials, see Noam, *Shifting Images*, 186–201, and literature cited there.

³² B. Yoma 39b.

2.3.2 The Menorah

In the second century CE, the rabbis concur with Josephus' solution, though they differ in the number of lamps: the western lamp was always kept burning in the daytime (תדיר), so that the other lamps, which burned only at night, could be lit from it in the evening.³³ Mishna Tamid describes the priest entering the room with the lampstand in the morning: "if he found two eastern lamps burning ... he would leave the westernmost one burning, as from it the other lamps were lit in the evening; if he found it extinguished, he would kindle it from the burnt offering altar" (6.1). The description is matter of fact, giving both options without any value judgement. The external altar is seen as a sure source of sacred fire, and implicitly, as the more dominant anchor of temple practice. The Tosefta (cited above) adds that this was the situation until the death of Simeon the Just, but after his death the western lamp was sometimes found extinguished at evening, presumably requiring re-ignition. Obviously, here the lampstand fire is considered a sign of divine favor and presence. The third-century rabbis already say this explicitly, adding a miracle:

[the lampstand] is witness for all humanity that the divine presence is present in Israel. What is its witness? Rav/Rava said: this is the western lamp, in which they put the same amount of oil as the others, and from it he (i.e., the priest) would light the others, and with it he would conclude the lighting.

B. Menahot 86b³⁴

The miracle according to the rabbis is apologetically directed at non-Jews, perhaps especially Christians. The possible interest of non-Jews in such miracles is not fantastic, and accords with the interest found earlier in Diodorus and Hecataeus in the "immortality" of the lamps, and also with the mention of the "eternal lamp" in some fourth-century magical recipes in Egypt, which are probably non-Jewish borrowings of a Jewish formula.³⁵

2.4 Summary

The temple in Jerusalem, and its mythic predecessor the tabernacle, had two main cultic fires, the altar and the lampstand; a third focus, the incense altar, did not host a permanent fire.

33 Sifra Numbers 59.10 (ed. Kahana, p. 149); t. Sota 13.7.

34 B. Menahot 86b (with Rava, fourth-century rabbi), b. Shabbat 22b (with Rav, third-century rabbi).

35 PGM 4.1217–1222, 3069–3070; Bohak, "Impact," 6.

The altar is identified as hosting a perpetual fire already in Leviticus, though other traditions of a non-perpetual fire apparently existed as well. The source of this fire is clearly divine, whether from the inner sanctum as in Leviticus, or from the heavens as in Chronicles and in most Second Temple writers. Several developments are found in Second Temple writings. First, the tradition in 2 Maccabees, that the fire in the Second Temple continued from the first, heavenly source, though it was concealed in the meantime; the perpetual fire of the altar serves this abiding connection. The highly fragmentary tradition in the Genesis Apocryphon appears to show that eternal fire was already present in Noah's sacrifices, implicitly linking later sacrificial practice with the mythic and more universal early history of humankind. Philo introduces many ideas: heavenly fire as pure, as opposed to polluted human fire; the need to link contemporary temple fire with the original fire; and, especially, the temple as mirroring and upholding cosmological order. Some of these ideas are more briefly present in Josephus as well, showing that they were broadly known among Greek-speaking Jewish intellectuals of the period. The rabbis in the second century, though they certainly acknowledge the presence of divine or heavenly fire in the First Temple, underline the importance of human ritual action in the Second Temple. Accordingly, they also claim that divine presence, manifested in a miracle of eternal fire, depended on a specific high priest. Thus, the long-term mytho-historical connections found in 2 Maccabees, or the cosmological emphases of Josephus and Philo, are replaced by a focus on the righteous individual.

In the Pentateuch, the lampstand is to be lit regularly every evening. In Zechariah, and more clearly in Philo and Josephus, the lampstand has cosmological symbolism, linking the temple cult to the divine and perpetual motion of the stars. In the first century BCE some non-Jewish writers say that the lampstand is known to host a perpetual, or undying fire; strangely, this idea does not appear in contemporary Jewish sources. Only in the late Second Temple period a tradition starts to develop that one or some of the lamps should remain alight also through the day, thus transferring some of the discourse of continuity from the altar to the lampstand. Again, for the rabbis, this continuity is somewhat miraculous, and they condition it upon the presence of a specific righteous priest or more generally as a manifestation of divine favor and presence in the temple.

3 Relationship with Other Mediterranean and Persian Practices

Neither altars nor lamps were unique to the Jerusalem temple: fire had a central role in most ancient sanctuaries in the periods under discussion. I shall therefore try and understand to what degree the discourses and practices of perpetuity, eternity and continuity seen here are special to Jerusalem and to Jewish literature, or are part of more general Mediterranean and/or Near Eastern trends. Since the comparative material is extensive, here I can only highlight the main points.

Sacrificial fire started to become popular in the Near East around the tenth century BCE, perhaps first in Asia Minor and Syria and then partially influencing Mesopotamian and Egyptian practice, though in these cultures fire was only one part of sacrificial practices, and more decisively in Greece, Etruscan, and Roman practices. However, even then perpetual fire does not figure in Mesopotamian or Egyptian practice, while in Greek and Roman it starts to be attested in the fifth century BCE, with a much greater focus starting in the first century BCE.³⁶

3.1 *Persia*

We will first look at the Persian material since the perpetual Zoroastrian fires are so significant: “it is difficult to avoid seeing here [i.e., concerning the perpetual altar fire] the influence of Zoroastrianism.”³⁷ Research is ongoing in the past years concerning the historical development of fire altars, fire rituals and fire temples in Persia.³⁸ The Avestan texts show that rituals of maintaining an everlasting fire were already practiced in Achaemenid times. While scholars in the past have argued, based on later sources, that fire temples already existed in this period as well, more recent scholarship showed that there is no archaeological basis for this, while the later texts have ideological reasons to make these claims.³⁹ Earlier ritual fires may have occurred in domestic or civic settings, rather than in dedicated fire temples, which may have started following the Macedonian conquest.⁴⁰ Sources of this period link the eternal fire to the kings,

36 For Near Eastern texts on the importance of altar fire, see de Ridder, *Altaarvuur*, 64–68. These do not include prescriptions for a perpetual fire.

37 Sperling, “Pants,” 383–384; see also Lang, “Altar.”

38 Schippmann, *Feuerheiligtümer*; Boyce, “Zoroastrian Temple”; Chosky, “Reassessing”; Callieri, *Architecture*, 73–102; Canepa, “Building New Vision”; König, “Zur Frage”; Cantera, “Fire”; Cantera, “Avestan Texts.”

39 See works cited in note above.

40 Plontke-Lüning, “Iranische Feuertempel.”

legitimizing their rule.⁴¹ In Zoroastrian ritual, the fire is not only an instrument to burn the sacrifice to the gods, or to honour the gods, rather, it itself receives a sacrifice (even if its status is not quite divine).

Turning to Greek and Latin evidence, Herodotus says that the Persians lack altars, temples or statues, and that they sacrifice to Zeus as the heavens and to the other cosmological forces without lighting a fire (1.131–132).⁴² Herodotus does not mention eternal fires. Slightly later, Xenophon describes the Persian king on the move in procession; right after horses and chariots sacred to the sun and to Zeus, there are “men carrying fire on a great altar.” A similar procession is described at greater length by Quintus Curtius (first century BCE): here too there are images of a solar deity and of Jupiter/Jesus and a fire “called by them eternal and sacred (*sacrum et aeternum vocabant*).”⁴³

A fragment of Pausanias of Antioch, which is difficult to date and may originate from the second century BCE to the sixth century CE,⁴⁴ provides a myth of the origin of Persian rituals of eternal fire, which includes a ball of lightning falling from heavens to save people from a storm.⁴⁵ The hero Perseus maintained some of the miraculous fire and built a temple to honor it, called the Temple of the Undying Fire (πυρὸς ἀθανάτου), both in “the city of the Ionitai” and in Persia.⁴⁶ In this myth, sacred and eternal fire does not come from humans and neither is it stolen from the gods, but it is freely given to a deserving hero. Indeed, gods are not mentioned in this story—though their involvement can be inferred, the fire is itself the sacred and divine element, not representing or honoring a specific deity.

The eternal fire of the Persians was common knowledge by the first century BCE, with Greek and Roman geographers and historians describing the Persian “sacred and eternal fire.”⁴⁷ Diodorus Siculus says that upon the death of the king, sacred fires were extinguished.⁴⁸ Such rituals were also practiced by communities inside Roman territory. Strabo describes Iranian fire sanctuaries in Cappadocia with altars where the fire is kept ever burning by the

41 Canepa, *Two Eyes*, 16–17; Canepa, “Building New Vision.”

42 For discussion of Greek and Roman perceptions of Persian fire rituals, see de Jong, *Traditions*, 346–350.

43 Curtius, *Historiae Alexandri Magni* 3.3.9.

44 BNJ 854 F9.

45 For other western traditions about the origin of the Persian fire rituals, see Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 36.40, Ammian Marcellinus 23.6.34–35; de Jong, *Traditions*, 322.

46 See Garstad, “Perseus.”

47 Curtius 4.13.12. See further references in de Jong, *Traditions*, 149.

48 Diodorus Siculus 17.114.5.

Magi (πῦρ ἄσβεστον φυλάττουσιν οἱ Μάγοι).⁴⁹ Pausanias describes sanctuaries related to the Persians in Lydia, with altars heaped with strangely colored ashes; the priest piles dry wood upon the altar, and these burst into flames after invoking the gods.⁵⁰ Several later historians of the fifth and sixth century CE speak of the Persians' fire and the importance of not extinguishing it.⁵¹

Greek and Roman writers see the fire as related to the well-being of the king and his relationship with the gods. The fire is perpetual and eternal, and also mobile; however, these are piquant ritual details not clearly given a symbolic dimension, perhaps except in Pausanias of Damascus. In the Avestan liturgies, the eternity of the fire is a given. Though it doubtless had meaning for the cosmology and ritual discourse, this is not clearly articulated in the text, nor is there a clear prohibition on the extinguishing of the fire as found in the Bible or in later Jewish texts. Thus, though there may certainly be a connection between the Persian rituals and the Jerusalem temple rituals and discourses from the fifth century BCE onwards, it is difficult to say how exactly they may have provided an influence beyond the very idea of continuity.

3.2 *Phoenicia*

In Phoenician shrines there may have been an eternal fire, and this would appear significant considering the geographical proximity to Jerusalem. However, the evidence here is both late and ambiguous. The best evidence for an actual perpetual flame at the temples of Melqart at Tyre and its colonies at Gades and Carthage, later assimilated to Herakles/Hercules, is Silius Italicus, who describes the rituals and iconography of the temple at Gades, including the feature that “a hearth maintains the altar flames perpetually” (*Irrestincta focus servant altaria flammae*).⁵² Considering the links between Gades and Tyre, it is generally assumed that a perpetual fire also existed at Tyre.⁵³ More to the point are coins (of Gordian III, 238–244)⁵⁴ and a relief from Tyre, perhaps from the Roman Imperial period: the coin includes an olive tree and baetyls, fre-

49 Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.3.15; Boyce and Grenet, *History*, 3:269–270.

50 Pausanias, *Descr.* 5.27.5–6; de Jong, *Traditions*, 362–364; Boyce and Grenet, *History*, 3:235–239.

51 Agathias, *Histories* 2.25; Procopius, *Wars* 2.24; Sebeos, *History* 8; Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7.8.7; Priscus, frag. 41.1; de Jong, *Traditions*, 348–350.

52 Silius Italicus, *Pun.* 3.29; see overview of sources in Martí-Aguilar, “Network of Melqart.”

53 Achilles Tatius 2.14, and Nonnus, *Dion.* 40.471–492 also speak of mythologies of Phoenician temples with everlasting fires. See Newbold, “Fiery World.”

54 Roman Provincial Coinage VII.2, 3582–3584.

quently found on Tyrian coins, but also a flaming censer/altar.⁵⁵ Altars are not unusual on coins, and there is no way to know whether the fire on this altar was perpetual; furthermore, the fact that it is a relatively rare type indicates that the altar was not considered so central to the cult's image. The relief was described by E. Will as depicting a flaming olive tree and other images referring to the foundation myth of the temple at Tyre.⁵⁶ Earlier reports on the temple at Tyre (e.g., Herodotus 2.44, Philo of Byblos) mention columns and baetyls but not an eternal fire. The upshot from these sources is that the only solid mention of a perpetual fire in Phoenician temples is Silius Italicus' description in the *Punica* of the temple at Gades, itself part of a narrative where the temple is exoticized; the other mentions of fire are quite general, relate to myth rather than ritual reality, and do not speak of perpetuity. The *Punica*'s description does not prove that this ritual existed elsewhere or earlier; it may well have been a local Roman-era innovation, induced by Egyptian/Roman examples. Nevertheless, clearly by the second century CE there was a mythical tradition concerning perpetual fire in Phoenician temples.

3.3 *Greece*

Public daily service "is not a characteristic Greek practice" and its presence in a small number of cases is explained as a Near Eastern influence.⁵⁷ Maintaining a perpetual fire requires a daily ritual—though a rather minor one, especially in the case of a lamp. Only starting in the Hellenistic period and especially in the Imperial period, daily worship is found in several cults.⁵⁸ As a rule, therefore, maintaining a perpetual fire was not a common feature of Greek practice. There are several significant outliers, however, which we will discuss here.

3.3.1 *Athens*

Athena's golden lamp in the Erechtheum at Athens burned perpetually. The lamp, made by a famous artist of the fifth century BCE, is described by Pausanias (1.26.7) as remaining lit "day and night" though refilled only once a year. Plutarch also describes it as a sacred lamp with perpetual fire, extinguished

55 Except for the relief, the sources are discussed already in Robertson Smith, *Lectures*, 108. For the coin, see Bijovsky, "Ambrosial Rocks."

56 Will, "Au sanctuaire"; discussed and reproduced also by Seyrig, "Antiquités syriennes"; for a reinterpretation of the relief, see Bonnet, *Enfants*, 358–359, who does not relate to the supposed fire.

57 Lupu, *Greek Sacred Law*, 74.

58 Nilsson, "Pagan Divine Service"; Chaniotis, "Staging," 181–183, esp. nn. 52–54, who comments that daily service was more common in cult associations and in the imperial cult, referencing epigraphic evidence.

only in extreme times and then relit from the sun with mirrors. If Pausanias' testimony is accepted, the custom of keeping the lamp perpetually lit goes back at least to the fifth century BCE. Some scholars have argued that it must be seen as the background for Athena's lamp epiphany to Odysseus (*Od.* 19.34), the only time the word "lamp" occurs in Homer.⁵⁹ However, even if Homer's narrative lamp reflects an actual ritual utensil in Athena's temple, there is no indication that this earlier lamp was perpetual.

3.3.2 The Prytaneion

Many Greek cities had a *prytaneion*—a public hearth sacred to Hestia. Most classical sources speak of this building as a civil rather than cultic center, with a focus on its superior dining facilities for honourable guests.⁶⁰ Under the Empire, the institution may not always have continued. Early evidence for this fire being perpetual, or for priests or priestesses tending this fire, is very scanty,⁶¹ leading Irad Malkin to write, "the explicit evidence is so late and meager that one wonders why scholars have accepted it as a universal custom of Greek religion at all."⁶² Thus, Theocritus (21.34–37) speaks of an unsleeping lamp (τὸ λύχνιον) in the *prytaneion*, not an altar or hearth; several sources link the *prytaneion* to Hestia, to a hearth and its "sacred fire," but do not say it is perpetual.⁶³ Two later sources say explicitly that an everlasting fire was maintained there: in the second century CE, Pollux (*Onom.* 1.2), speaking of the hearth in general; and a scholiast to Thucydides, concerning the Athens *prytaneion*, says that "others say that the *prytaneion* was the treasury (*tameion*) of fire, where was also the unextinguished fire (*asbeston pur*)."⁶⁴ Plutarch says that "wherever in Greece a perpetual fire (πῦρ ἄσβεστόν) is kept, as at Delphi and Athens, it is committed to the charge ... of widows." The use of the specific examples of Athens and Delphi implies that in his time at least, a perpetual fire was otherwise uncommon, but it is difficult to say how uncommon. Pausanias (5.15.9) speaks of the fire at the *prytaneion* at Olympia burning day and night, and producing a large amount of ashes. So, though common hearths were presumably

59 Pfeiffer, "Goldene Lampe"; Cook, *Odyssey*, 161–168; Bierl, "Turn on the Light."

60 For the everlasting fire in the *prytaneion*, see Miller, *Prytaneion*. For the question of transfer of fire from the *prytaneion* to colonies, see Malkin, *Religion*, 114–134; specifically for the question of the perpetuity of fire, pp. 125–129, from which I have adopted much of the discussion.

61 Kajava, "Hestia"; Merkelbach, "Kult"; for references in general to Hestia, see Farnell, *Cults*, 5:345–373.

62 Malkin, *Religion*, 114.

63 Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.65.3; Scholia to Pindar, *Nem.* 11.1; *Etymologicum Magnum*, s.v. *prytaneion*.

present in *prytaneia* throughout Greece, there is little evidence that perpetual fire burned on them, or that the officials who were required to keep them burning were invested with a religious significance or required to use specific rituals.

3.3.3 Delphi

The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* describes the mythic foundation of the temple at Delphi, with a proclamation by Apollo: “Though each one of you with knife in hand should slaughter sheep continually/forever (σφάζειν αἰεὶ μῆλα), yet would you always have abundant store” (ll. 535–536). Though fire is not mentioned here, the continuity and perpetuity of sacrifice may imply a perpetual fire as well.

The eternal fire as Apollo’s temple at Delphi is mentioned in several sources. Aeschylus probably mentions it in the *Libation Bearers*, when Orestes goes as a suppliant “to the temple set on the womb of the earth ... and to the bright fire said to be undying (πυρός τε φέγγος ἄφθιτον κεκλημένον).”⁶⁴ There are several Delphic inscriptions from the second and early first centuries BCE describing the Pythais, an Athenian festival of Apollo centering on a procession from Athens to Delphi. Though the main function of the event appeared to be bringing sacrifices and offerings to Apollo at Delphi, one of the officiants in this procession was a female *purphoros*, fire-bearer, who took fire from the altar at Delphi back to Athens.⁶⁵ Beyond the mention of this official, however, there is no special interest in the fire, or even a hint that it was perpetual. Strabo, the main source for the ritual, only speaks of “taking the offering to Delphi” when a flash of lightning occurs in a specific area.⁶⁶ More significant epigraphic evidence is the late second-century BCE oath from Delphi, which mentions “undying fire (πῦρ ἀθάνατον)” among other gods such as Apollo.⁶⁷ As a singular expression, it would be surprising if it did not have some specific connection to the fire at Delphi.

64 Aeschylus, *Cho.* 1034–1035. “Probably,” as the scholiast ad loc. adds that this imperishable fire/light is “το ἐν Παρνασσῶι,” that is, the mysterious light said to be seen at times on Delphi’s Mount Parnassus, attributed to Dionysus, see Sophocles, *Ant.* 1112 and scholiasts ad loc., Euripides, *Ion* 716, 1125. It is surprising that for the scholiast this is not clearly a reference to an eternal fire at a hearth/altar, so well known from Plutarch.

65 FD III.2.13 = SIG³ 711 D 22: “πυρφόρος ἡ ἐγ Δελφ[ῶν]· Τιμῶ,” FD III.2.32 (97 BC) = SIG³ 728I: “καὶ τὴν πυρφόρον ἤγαγεν Ἀμφικράτης Ἐπιστράτου Ἀθηναίος.”

66 Strabo, *Geogr.* 9.404.

67 FD III 4 no. 278 B 1.14 ff.: καὶ Ἀπόλλων Πύθιος καὶ Λατῶ καὶ Ἀρτεμις καὶ Ἑστία καὶ πῦρ ἀθάνατον καὶ θεοὶ πάντες.

The main source of information on the Delphic fire is Plutarch, who was a priest there in the late first century CE. Plutarch narrates that after the victory at Platea, the Athenians consulted the Delphic oracle what sacrifice was to be performed in the new temple built to honor Zeus. The oracle responded that sacrifice could be made only after “they had extinguished the fire throughout the land, which he said had been polluted by the Barbarians, and kindled it pure from the public hearth at Delphi (καθαρόν ἐκ Δελφῶν ἀπὸ τῆς κοινῆς ἐστίας).” Euchidas, who promised to bring the fire “from near the god,” ran to Delphi, purified himself, took fire from the altar; after he arrived at Platea he died from the effort.⁶⁸

Though clearly special, the Delphic fire is not described in this narrative as eternal or even as especially sacred. Why is the Delphic fire pure? Knowing from other sources that the fire is kept perpetually, we can assume that it is pure because of its perpetuity, its connection to some primeval time in which it was first lighted.⁶⁹ However, it is noteworthy that this idea is not present in the text itself, so that it is quite possible that the fire is pure simply because of its association with Apollo, the purifying god, and with Delphi—the religious center of the Greeks. The narrative of the ultra-runner who dies upon arrival may be derived from a combination of the famous Marathon runner account,⁷⁰ together with the well-known traditions of bringing pure fire from Delos to Lemnos in an annual purification.⁷¹ The story appears to be an embellishment by Plutarch to piously frame the battle of Platea, a central “lieu de mémoire” of ancient Greece,⁷² and also strengthen the connection with Delphi, a favorite of his.

More significant evidence is from Plutarch’s dialogue *On the E at Delphi* and the *Life of Numa*, both of which use the expression “undying fire.” In the first work, as an example that things relating to the divine are hidden in riddles, Plutarch mentions that for the “undying fire” only pine and laurel are burnt (385c). In *Num.* 9, Plutarch compares the rituals of the Roman Vestal Virgins

68 Plutarch, *Arist.* 20. The precise place of the “pure fire” of Delphi in this narrative is not very clear. While the oracle demanded relighting from the “public hearth,” Euchidas lighted it from “near the god,” or from the “altar.” Malkin (*Religion*, 119) nevertheless argues what is meant is the common hearth in the *prytaneion* of Delphi, rather than in the temple of Apollo. Hestia is specifically connected to Delphi in the *Homeric Hymn to Hestia* no. 24, where she is called “you who take care of the sacred house of King Apollo the far-shooter in holy Pytho” (Olson, *Homeric Hymn*, 116–117).

69 For the connection between purity and an original time, see, e.g., Duschinsky, “Ideal.”

70 For the relationship between the stories, see Athanassaki, “Who Was Eucles,” 213.

71 E.g., Philostratus, *Her.* 53.5–7.

72 Jung, *Marathon*, 186–187.

with those of the Greeks. As opposed to the Vestal fire, which is kept by virgins as befits the “pure nature of fire,” in Delphi and Athens the fire is kept by women who “had ceased from sexual relations.” When the fire is extinguished due to war, it is lit again from the sun’s heat using mirrors.⁷³ Plutarch continues with an elaborate description of the rekindling of the flame. The main idea of the passage, as in the Euchidas narrative above, is the purity of the fire. Though Plutarch speaks of the pure nature of fire in general, the purity of the Delphic fire clearly goes beyond this. This requirement of purity leads to several interlocked ritual requirements: its perpetuity, its maintenance by non-sexually active women, and its kindling from the sun when extinguished.

The eternal fire is mentioned in another fictional source, which is quite difficult to date, but probably between the second and fourth century CE: a fragment of a novel set in Delphi. In the fragment, the barbarian Daulis threatens to kill the Delphian prophet or priest, who had taken refuge “at the hearth in the *prodomos*, where the treasure trove of undying fire is preserved (τὸ τῆς ἀθανάτου πυρῶς τεθησαυρισμένον φυλάττεται),” and urges him not to pollute the shrine with bloodshed.⁷⁴ Yet again the focus is on purity. Uniquely, and probably wrongly,⁷⁵ this text pinpoints the location of the sacred fire at the *prodomos*, at the hearth. The fire is not only called undying, as in Plutarch, but also described as a preserved treasure. The undying fire at the hearth is used here as a place of refuge, as hearths were in general.⁷⁶

Many studies have highlighted the importance of Delphi for Plutarch, who was priest for Apollo at the temple for many years and promoted the site in his political work and writings.⁷⁷ Specifically, Plutarch was interested in raising the profile of Delphi vis-à-vis the Roman elite, by highlighting the antiquity of the site and its classical history.⁷⁸ Considering this and the distribution of evidence, I think Plutarch’s details—especially his historical reconstructions—should be treated with suspicion. The Plataean runner bringing fire in *Aristides* is similar to other myths of fire distribution and of miraculous runners, and in

73 Plutarch, *Num.* 9.5–7. For commentary, see Bätz, *Sacrae virgines*, 23–61.

74 Edition and trans. Stephens and Winkler, *Ancient Greek Novels*, 381.

75 See Fontenrose, “Daulis,” 110 n. 9; The placement of the main altar and the hestia (where, presumably, the eternal fire was kept) at Delphi is discussed by Pouilloux and Roux, *Énigmes*; Ekroth, *Sacrificial Rituals*, 43–44. Altars were generally placed in front of the *prodomos/pronaos*, at the bottom of the steps, and not in the *prodomos*, while hearths would be inside the building.

76 Cross, *Hearth*.

77 Zagdoun, “Plutarque à Delphes”; Flacelière, “Plutarque et Pythie”; Stadter, “Plutarch: Diplomat”; Stadter, “Plutarch and Apollo.”

78 McInerney, “Do You See.”

Numa the Greek fires are explicitly described as comparanda to the Vestal fire. Since the perpetuity of the vestal fire was so famous, and the consequences of not maintaining it were considered so severe, Plutarch could hardly claim less for the perpetual fire at Delphi, the Greek center of the earth. By juxtaposing the ritual techniques at the fires of Rome, Athens, and Delphi, they are all shown to be similar if not identical, and thus part of the same religious culture; *Numa* was simply borrowing from the religious toolbox of Greece. As the city of Rome is the religious center of the Roman Empire and the Vestals are responsible (practically or symbolically) for sacrificial materials for all Romans, for Plutarch, Delphi is the religious center, the common hearth of all Greece, and fire from there is used throughout “the land.”⁷⁹

To sum up this section: only one early source (Aeschylus) mentions a fire “said to be” undying, and that not unequivocally. A clear mention in which the undying fire is divinized is found in the late second century BCE, but this source does not provide further detail. The festival and procession of the Pythaia show that fire was indeed brought from Delphi to Athens in this period, but this does not seem to be the main function of the event. Only in the late first century CE, with Plutarch, do we find more abiding interest in the fire of the Delphic center: in the burning material used, in its ability to replenish the polluted hearths of all Greece, in the special priestesses who maintain it, and in the pure technique used to reignite it. None of these details is corroborated by any other source, and without Plutarch we would have very little knowledge of the Delphic fire. Following Plutarch, a fragmentary Greek novel also highlights the sanctity and perpetuity of the fire. While it is clear that a perpetual fire was indeed maintained at Delphi in the second century BCE and probably earlier, interest in it before the first century CE was not greater than that in other Greek hearths.

79 To my mind, Cole (*Landscapes*, 83) goes far beyond the evidence when writing that “When a local ritual fire was extinguished, or was compromised by pollution, it had to be renewed with sacred fire from a central sanctuary,” citing Plutarch, *Arist.* 20. Plutarch’s conception of Delphi significantly influenced scholarship. For example, Frazer, *Plutarch’s Lives*, 27, translated “rekindled with untainted fire brought from Delphi, the common hearth of Greece,” even though “of Greece” is not found in the original text. In historical sources, this epithet is sometimes used for Athens: Fontenrose Q. 198 = PW 171 (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 5.187d, 6.254B, Aelian, *Var. hist.* 4.7.6, Aelius Aristides, *Orat.* 1.13, 54, 274). Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 170 is more cautious: “The ever-burning hearth in the temple of Delphi was *sometimes* seen as the communal hearth for the whole of Greece,” citing Plutarch.

3.3.4 Ephesos

In the sanctuary of Artemis at Ephesos, the *prytaneion* continued to hold ritual functions, and was rebuilt in the Augustan period, with the *prytaneis*—the head priest—given high authority.⁸⁰ An inscription orders “that the prytanis shall light a fire on all the altars and burn incense and sacred aromatic herbs, offering to the gods on the customary days sacrifices numbering 365 in all,” showing that a daily sacrifice took place at least somewhere in the precinct.⁸¹ Here, lighting fire on all the altars and offering incense (it is unclear at what frequency) appears to be independent of offering animal sacrifices. Worship thus encompasses both the whole year and the whole sacred space of the precinct. Several imperial inscriptions from the same temple giving thanks to the Hestia, Artemis and the “uncorrupted fire” (Πυρὶ ἀφθάρτῳ) show the popularity of this cult.⁸²

Also from Ephesus, two epigrams by priestesses of the second half of the first century CE attest to the significance of Hestia as a goddess of fire and light in the religious life of this area. Praising Hestia, they describe her as “[tend]ing the eternal light (ἀέναν φῶς) from heaven on your altars ... who keep and hold within yourself the god-sent light, a remnant of the harmony [of the universe].”⁸³ Thus, at least in the Imperial period it appears Hestia’s role was seen as related to cosmic fire as well as sacrificial fire; and that this fire or light was frequently identified as eternal.

3.3.5 Other Greek Sanctuaries

There are sources on several lesser-known Greek sanctuaries where perpetual fires were maintained:

1. Temple of Apollo at Cyrene: “Always your fire is everlasting (ἀεὶ δέ τοι ἀέναν πῦρ), and never do ashes feed around yesterday’s coal” (Callimachus, *Hymns* 2.83).
2. Sanctuary of Apollo Lycius, Argos: A fire is kept burning perpetually to Phoroneus, who is considered by the locals to be the giver of fire to mankind rather than Prometheus (Pausanias 2.19.5).

80 MacLean Rogers, *Mysteries*.

81 I. Ephesos 10 = LSS 121 (third-century CE summary of ancestral law). For this inscription see Suys, *Déméter*.

82 MacLean Rogers, *Mysteries*, 304, I. Ephesos 1060, McCabe, *Ephesos* 641–642, 651–652.

83 I. Ephesos 1062 = Ephesos 2058. Compare the much earlier (fourth century BCE) hymn of Aristonoos (Furley and Bremer, *Greek Hymns*, 2.3), describing Hestia as the one “who alone brings firelight to the sacred altars of the gods”; and the second–third century CE *Orphic hymn to Hestia*, which speaks of Hestia as that “who maintains the eternal fire in

3. Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Mantinea, Arcadia: “here they keep a fire, taking anxious care not to let it go out” (Pausanias 8.9.2).
4. Sanctuary of Despoina (“the mistress”) in Lycosura, Arcadia. The sanctuary included various temples and altars, including a temple of Pan, which was considered very powerful and also included an oracle in the past, as well as a perpetual fire (Pausanias 8.37.10).
5. At the temple of Hephaestus at Etna there is a fire which is “unextinguished and sleepless” (πῦρ ἄσβεστόν τε καὶ ἀκοίμητον) (Aelian, *Nat. an.* 11.3).
6. A site in Lycia (Phasalis/Chimaera, modern Yanartas) where a fire burned continuously lit by gases from a natural seep (Pliny, *Nat.* 2.110, 5.28; Seneca, *Ep.* 79; Ps.-Scylax, *Peripl.* 100). Though Ps.-Scylax refers to sacred area dedicated to Hephaestus at the site (ἱερὸν Ἡφαίστου), surveys have not located a temple, only dedications and statue-bases, and “the inscriptions ... make no reference to any temple or altar.”⁸⁴
7. A sanctuary at Apolonia in Illyria adjacent to asphalt springs included a perpetual natural fire, a nymphaeum and an oracle.⁸⁵ The oracle, according to Cassius Dio, was based on pyromancy by throwing incense into the fire and observing the results. The fire appears also on local coinage.⁸⁶
8. The temple of Zeus Amon at Siwa featured a perpetual lamp. Unexplained changes in its oil consumption prompt a long discussion in Plutarch about the possible changing of the length of the day, as a preamble to his analysis of the decline of oracles (*Def. orac.* 2–3).
9. A lamp at a roofless temple of Aphrodite at an unknown location, which remained alight in storm winds; the miraculous lamp is discussed disdainfully by Augustine (*Civ.* 21.6).
10. Not Greek, but worthy of mention is the British Roman temple of Sulis Minerva, associated with the healing springs there, where a coal fire burned continuously according to one source.⁸⁷

These cases are exceptions which prove the general rule of eternal fire not being a Greek custom, and the writers rarely provide any rationale for the ritual. Hephaestus’ fires and the sanctuary at Apolonia are clearly related to specific

the midst of the house.” The Homeric hymns to Hestia, however, do not mention fire or light. Torches usually accompany Hestia in iconography, see Parisinou, *Light*, 81–83.

84 Ruggieri, “Epigraphic Testimonies”; see in general Lalagüe-Dulac, “Chimère.”

85 Aristotle, [*Mir. ausc.*] 127; Cassius Dio 41.45.

86 For a comprehensive discussion, see Yébenes, “prodigiosa fuente.” I thank the anonymous reader for directing my attention to this case.

87 C. Julius Solinus, *De mirabilibus mundi* 22.10.

natural phenomena; the two Arcadian temples appear related to the Eleusinian Mysteries, where fire was always a central feature, and may preserve an ancient, local, ritual; the fire of Phroneus is, again, a unique feature, linked to a specific local myth. These examples do show, however, that perpetual fire was a known ritual in Greece, and also indicate (though do not prove) that such fires were a local and perhaps pre-Roman phenomenon. At Cyrene, Callimachus' praise does not clearly mean that the fire was perpetual, and can be read as indicating successive or many sacrifices without pause.⁸⁸ The clause about ashes can be interpreted as saying that ashes were regularly taken away, and not allowed to stay on the altar, or that the ashes miraculously disappear as in Aphrodite's temple at Eryx (Ael. NA 10.50); or, more simply, that the large amount of sacrifices and fuel meant that yesterday's coals were already not recognizable. Considering the locale, we can speculate about Phoenician influences, but as we saw, there is little solid evidence for Phoenician eternal fires.

A somewhat cryptic remark on perpetual fire is made by Porphyry in the third century CE. Describing the early history of sacrifice, he argues that people first burned grasses to the gods of heaven (i.e., the heavenly bodies), "immortalizing by fire (τοῦ πρὸς ἀπαθανατίζοντες) the honours offered to them. It is for them that we preserve an undying fire in the temples, this being the thing most like them." This sentence, together with the whole narrative, is usually considered part of a long quote of Theophrastus (fourth century BCE). However, this is not a verbatim quote, and certain parenthetical comments such as this on the undying fire in temples may be from Porphyry rather than his source, since Porphyry himself says he "added a few things" (2.32.6). The idea is quite similar to ideas found in contemporaries such as Iamblichus.⁸⁹

3.4 Rome

Like many elements of Roman religion, there is little information on the fire maintained by the Vestals before the first century BCE,⁹⁰ though semi-mythic narratives concerning some Vestal priestesses from the fourth and third century BCE are found in later writers. According to several late Republican writers, the main role of the Vestals was to tend "the eternal fire of the public hearth" (Cicero, *Leg.* 2.20). The extinguishing of the vestal fire was generally considered as negligence of the head Vestal, who was flogged and suspected of not

88 Williams, *Commentary*, 74.

89 See Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 5.11.

90 To mention just some recent publications: Beard, "Rereading"; Staples, *Good Goddess*, 129–156; Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*.

maintaining her chastity.⁹¹ But extinguishing the fire was not only a personal matter of the Vestals—it was considered an evil portent for Rome in general. The continuity of the vestal fire was thus a matter of extreme importance and even anxiety for Roman writers and presumably for the Roman elite in general. Though the fire is considered perpetual and extinguishing it is a grave ritual error, it was not actually continuous or eternal; rather, it was ceremoniously rekindled annually on the first of March.⁹²

In the first century BCE Roman writers developed theologies and histories of the *aedes vestae* and the vestal fire, and use them as links in their myths of Roman development, on the background of the ascendancy of Caesar and Augustus. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.76.3) and Livy (1.3.11) already have a Vestal virgin, Rea Sylvia, the mythical mother of Romulus and Remus, officiating in Alba. Dionysius assimilates Roman with Greek ritual: he attributes to Romulus the setting up of common hearths according to Greek custom, and to Numa their unification and the appointing of virgin priestesses (1.65). Indeed, Dionysius simply calls Vesta *hestia*, and the Vestals—*hestiades*.

Though Dionysius knows of the myth that Aeneas brought the palladium and other objects maintained in the *aedes vestae* from Troy, he does not say that the perpetual fire was brought from there as well (1.69), thus coming short of this final link between contemporary ritual and mythical history found in Latin writers of the period. Vergil (*Aen.* 2.296–297) has the ghost of Hector hand Vesta her fillets and the eternal fire to Aeneas in a dream; however, the actual taking of this fire is not mentioned, and the Trojan eternal fire does not appear elsewhere in the poem. Propertius, writing soon after the *Aeneid*, and Ovid, writing a generation later, play up this connection by using the expressions “Trojan Vesta” (*Vesta Iliacae*, Propertius 4.4.69), “Trojan flame” (*ignibus Iliacis*, Ovid, *Fast.* 3.29) or “Trojan hearth” (*Iliacis focus*, Ovid, *Fast.* 3.142), a usage which continues and expands in later texts.⁹³ Thus, though the link is tenuous at first, during the late first century BCE it became a well-known reference.

Considering the ideological power of the vestal fire, it is not surprising that Augustus and later Roman leaders sought to control it by bringing the shrine under their control, and that Augustan poets highlighted the parallel between

91 Cicero, *Leg.* 2.29, 2.20; Plutarch, *Num.* 9, 11; Livy 28.11.6–7; Firmicus Maternus, *Err. prof. rel.* 14.3; Ovid, *Fast.* 3.415–430, 6.295–299; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.64.4–6, 2.66.2, 2.67.5–68.5; Valerius Maximus 1.1.6–7; *CIL* 6.32416 = ILS 4931. See Mueller, *Roman Religion*, 44–68.

92 Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.12.6; Festus p. 94 L.

93 Juvenal, *Sat.* 4.61; Statius, *Silvae* 1.1.9; Lucan 9.993.

everlasting Roman rule, perpetual rulers, and the perpetual fire of Vesta.⁹⁴ These emphases can be opposed to the earlier historical reconstructions of Dionysus of Halicarnassus and Cicero, who connect the Vestals to the Greek Hestia rather than to the Trojan myth. However, as there are no significant sources for the symbolism of the vestal fire before the mid-first century BCE, it is difficult to know whether this complex of ideas is an invention of the period or the adaptation and expansion of earlier ideas. In the third century CE, perhaps as a reaction to perceived crisis, inscriptions commemorating vestal virgins also emphasize eternity and continuity.⁹⁵

The vestal fire is also the subject for cosmological, philosophical and ritual explanations, especially by Dionysus of Halicarnassus and Ovid, who elaborate on the idea that Vesta is the earth, developing Vesta's image as a stable, immobile center—of the earth as a whole and of the Roman Empire.⁹⁶ Echoing this idea, the virginity of the Vestals is explained by Ovid through the infertility of fire (rather than its purity as in Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Cicero (*Leg.* 2.12.29). For Plutarch (*Cam.* 20), however, the fertility of the vestal fire was linked to movement rather than stability.

4 Conclusions

We have shown that the notion and practice of maintaining a perpetual fire can have many different dimensions. Tracing these dimensions in various ancient cultures can show how practices and ideas may have travelled and impacted one another.

A list may include:

1. The simple practice of maintaining a fire, which can have a practical significance when fires were not easy to light.
2. A perpetual fire shows the abundance of sacrifices or other rituals, which require a constantly replenished fire, as well as the performance of constant rituals in the sanctuary. This may not require a perpetual flame but a regular ritual such as a daily sacrifice.
3. A perpetual fire may be described as miraculous—for example, it remains alight even when oil is not sufficient, when there are winds or rain, etc.

94 See Herbert-Brown, *Ovid*, 66–81; Foubert, “Vesta”; Newlands, *Playing*, 124–145; Garani, “Ovid’s Temple(s)”; Balbuza, “Idea.”

95 Nock, “A Diis Electa”; Palmer, “Time.”

96 Festus 320L; Ovid, *Fast.* 6.265–270.

The fire therefore shows the uniqueness of the sanctuary, its divinity, personnel, etc.

4. Fire in a sanctuary symbolizes, demonstrates, and enacts the presence of the divine. Therefore, a perpetual fire shows that divinity remains in the sanctuary perpetually.
5. A focus on the specialness of a specific place, since the same fire has been here for a very long time.
6. The perpetual fire came from somewhere else, or has been mobile, but it is still the same fire: it therefore shows continuity despite movement.
7. A focus on the connection with an ancient institution/period/person: the current temple is connected to the ancient one because the same sacred fire has been burning since then. If the fire was of a heavenly or otherwise otherworldly source, its eternity shows the abiding connection with this source.
8. A perpetual fire remains pure, since it was not tainted by human contact.
9. A perpetual fire mirrors cosmological eternal fires—especially the sun, moon, and stars, which were considered eternal.
10. Perpetual fire is conditioned on the presence and actions of specific individuals.

Perpetual fires—on altars, and to a lesser extent, in lamps—were part of the cultic repertoire of the ancient Mediterranean at least since the fifth century BCE. Perpetual fires were certainly a focus of Persian cult at this date (and probably earlier), even if its architectural setting in a fire temple developed somewhat later. Apollo's temple at Delphi probably included a perpetual fire by this period, and Athens a perpetual lamp. Thus, the injunction for a perpetual altar fire in Leviticus, though not singular, is hardly typical for the Mediterranean or the Ancient Near East. In this light, Persian influence would appear probable, but since there are few details in both Leviticus and the Persian sources of this period, it is difficult to say more.

Before the second century BCE there is little discussion of such fires in non-Jewish Greek and Latin sources, and there is no clear parallel for Chronicles' emphasis on fire from heaven or 2 Maccabees' narrative of continuity of sacred fire through history. This lack of interest contrasts with the attitude of Greek and Latin writers starting in the first century BCE, for whom perpetual fires, especially in the political centers, are signs of continuity, divine presence, cosmological importance, and piety of the priesthood and the political rulers. This interest appears most clearly in late first-century BCE Rome, where the fire kept and renewed annually by the vestal virgins is saturated with several dimensions: (a) the mythic connection with Greece in general or with Troy specifically and the eternity of Rome's rule; (b) the stability of Rome as mirror-

ing the stability of the earth, i.e., Rome's centrality in the cosmos; (c) the purity of the fire, which is enhanced by the virginity of the priestesses; (d) the connection with specific mythical or historical priestesses, whether those known for their piety and virtue, or the opposite; (e) the political-religious danger, in light of all these dimensions, of the extinguishing of the fire. All of these elements are found also in the Jewish sources discussed above, though not in the same period. For example, narratives about specific priestesses performing miracles appear early in the Roman tradition (e.g., in Livy, but probably reflecting earlier traditions), but in Jewish sources only in the Tosefta; while the mythic geographical links created by the eternal fire is found in Roman sources of the first century BCE, but in the Jewish world already in the second century BCE. There are also differences in content: the Roman tradition does not claim the fire descended from heaven, and is less interested in actual continuity since the fire is renewed; the cosmic symbolism is different, since it links Vesta to the earth rather than to the heavens; and, of course, there were no virgin priestesses in the Jerusalem temple (despite later Christian traditions). These differences are significant, but they do not negate the basic similarity in themes found in both traditions.

Further east, to the Greek world, there are sporadic traditions of various sites with eternal fires. Most of these may have been significant in their time but there is little evidence to know much beyond their existence. In general, such sites were unusual, generated comment, and were sometimes associated with specific gods or heroes of fire (Hephaestus, Apollo, Hestia, Phroneus) but also with gods not typically seen as such (Pan, Venus, Athena, Demeter, Artemis). The main exception to this is Delphi, and to a lesser extent, Athens. It is clear that a perpetual fire existed in Delphi from long before the Roman period, and it was even mentioned in inscriptions as part of the cult. However, it is only in Plutarch that it receives a significant role, similar in many ways to that of Vesta in Rome; this makes it probable that this emphasis was an elaboration of Plutarch in the face of Roman political, cultural, and religious dominance.

Seen from this comparative perspective, the Jewish texts of the Hellenistic period, highlighting the historical dimensions of the perpetual fire appear quite unique and unusual in their period, with no clear parallels in the Mediterranean world. On the other hand, the texts of the Roman period—especially Philo and the rabbis—have significant parallels in the Roman writers, as concerns cosmological dimensions, purity and connection to an original fire, and exemplary individuals. The wider Mediterranean influence of these Roman concerns can be seen in Plutarch, who, like Philo and the rabbis, represents a non-Roman sanctuary through the same issues.

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