

SALTING EVERYONE WITH FIRE (MARK 9.49-50): PURIFICATION, PRESERVATION OR PUNISHMENT?

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As is widely known, salt had many uses in antiquity. Narrowing the sense implied in Mk 9.49-50 might be simpler if scholars could agree on the connection between the two verses, but consensus eludes us. Many scholars would agree with Joel Marcus that ‘Everyone will be salted with fire’ may represent ‘the most enigmatic logion of Jesus in the NT’.¹

Such confusion should not surprise us since it eluded ancient audiences as well. While including material that overlaps with Mk 9.43-47 (Mt. 5.29-30; 18.6-9; Lk. 17.1-2) and part of 9.50 (Mt. 5.13; Lk. 14.34-35), Matthew and Luke already omit Mk 9.49 and the contextual connections. The disproportionate number of textual variants also attests to considerable confusion regarding meaning among later scribes, especially regarding 9.49.²

The many uses of salt make potential parallels for it ubiquitous,³ and possibly more than one form of usefulness stands behind Jesus’ use of this image.⁴ This article risks no danger of resolving the saying’s enigmatic charac-

1. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB, 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 698.

2. Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markus-Evangelium* (2 vols.; HThKNT, 2; Freiburg: Herder, 2000), II, p. 116; M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 284.

3. On salt and its uses in antiquity, see Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 31.39.73–42.92; Adalberto Giovannini, ‘Salt. II. Graeco-Roman Antiquity’, in Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (eds.), *Brill’s New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* (22 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2002), XII, pp. 903-5.

4. After listing eleven views, W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [3 vols.; ICC;

ter. Some proposed solutions are, however, more probable than others, and exploring the ancient context that supports some of the possibilities may help interpreters favor some proposals over others. Because some solutions may be complementary to others, it is possible that more than one nuance of the salt image is at work (especially if the individual sayings do not need to play on precisely the same nuances).

Attempting to Take the Sayings Together

Uses of salt may shed light on the sayings individually, and taking the sayings separately allows interpreters more flexibility for trying to resolve their meaning. Some resort to a reconstructed Aramaic substratum to make sense of 9.49;⁵ some of these reconstructions are plausible historically, but they would not have helped Mark's hellenophone target audience. Even if the primary reason for their original linkage was simple catchwords, we normally seek to hear sayings fit into the contexts in which they are embedded. There is a likely overall sense of 9.49-50 when taken together, including judgment for the wicked, despite considerable variation in how we might understand the details. Nevertheless, the connection readers may find between the verses depends partly on who is included in the $\pi\alpha\lambda\varsigma$ of 9.49.

If $\pi\alpha\lambda\varsigma$ in 9.49 refers only to the wicked salted in the unquenchable fire from 9.48 (also 9.43), those who have salt in themselves and remain salty (9.50) will not need to be salted with fire. If $\pi\alpha\lambda\varsigma$ means that *everyone* (including the righteous) will be salted with fire (the more common understanding), the wicked experience the fire as judgment and the latter as testing the genuineness of their salt (whether they are 'worth their salt', to compare a modern English idiom) and/or purifying them.

In context, the salt of 9.50 (whatever else it may symbolize) also involves peace with one another (further in 9.50) and thus welcoming one another

Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–1997], I, pp. 472-73) prudently conclude that the saying may play on salt's many uses rather than a particular one (similarly Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew* [2 vols.; WBC, 33AB; Dallas: Word, 1993–1995], I, p. 99).

5. E.g., T.J. Baarda, 'Mark IX.49', *NTS* 5 (1959), pp. 318-21 (319); W.W. Fields, "'Everyone Will Be Salted With Fire' (Mark 9.49)", *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (1985), pp. 299-304; most helpfully, Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 528.

(9.37, 41). It therefore contrasts with those who harm the faith of the vulnerable (9.42), like John could have done (9.38). This then continues the contrast between reward and kingdom life for the righteous on the one hand (9.41, 43, 45, 47) and damnation on the other (9.42-43, 45, 47-48). The fire of 9.49 torments (or destroys) the wicked in Gehinnom (9.43-48) but tests or purifies the righteous. Even this attempt to take the sayings together, however, does not explain how ancient uses of salt relate to this imagery.

Fiery Judgment and/or Testing

Taken by itself, ‘salted with fire’ probably belongs to the same realm of thought as the judgment oracle with which it coheres, ‘baptized in fire’ (Mt. 3.11; Lk. 3.16).⁶ The unquenchable fire of that saying, usually attributed to Q, likely draws on the same Isaian image on which Mark’s context draws (Isa. 66.24 in Mk 9.48).⁷ Fire seems to reflect judgment, in keeping with the preceding context (Mk 9.43-48); perhaps πᾶς in 9.49 refers only to the wicked. But if the same image is continued more positively in 9.50, the fire that scorches the wicked may test and/or purify the righteous,⁸ and some understand the salt also as purifying (often citing Ezek. 16.4; 43.24).⁹

6. Donald H. Juel, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 136; John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (SP, 2; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 289.

7. Note οὐ σβέννυται in Mk 9.48 and ἄσβεστος in Mt. 3.12; Lk. 3.17; Mk 9.43.

8. Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (BNTC; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991), p. 233; Benoît Standaert, *Évangile selon Marc: Commentaire* (3 vols.; ÉB, 61; Pendé: Gabalda, 2010), II, p. 720; Eckhard Schnabel, *Mark* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), p. 229.

9. Hooker, *Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 233; Standaert, *Évangile selon Marc*, II, p. 720; Peter Dschulnigg, *Das Markusevangelium* (ThKNT, 2; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), p. 264; Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 449; Hans F. Bayer, ‘Mark’, in Daniel M. Doriani, Hans F. Bayer and Thomas R. Schreiner (eds.), *Matthew–Luke* (EC, 8; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), pp. 451-702 (602).

Many envision the point of the image as eschatological¹⁰ purification by testing, especially persecution.¹¹ This approach is consistent with ancient Jewish thought: tested by martyrdom, God's people were like gold tried in the furnace and as sacrifices (Wis. 3.5-6). 'The eschatological fire', says Marcus, 'will punish the wicked but refine the righteous'.¹² It purges both the wicked from the righteous and wickedness from the righteous. The righteous of 9.50, who surmount the stumbling tests of 9.42-43, 45, 47,¹³ will not face the worse fire of Gehenna (9.43, 45, 47-48).

John's oracle in Q contrasts water and fire baptisms. Baptism in water purifies, and baptism in fire purifies even more strongly than does water.¹⁴ Whatever could not withstand fire would be purified by water, but whatever could withstand fire would be purified by both (Num. 31.20-23; cf. Josh. 6.17-19, 24; 1 Cor. 3.12-15). Josephus viewed even the roasting of some kinds of sacrifices as a form of purification.¹⁵ Everyone understood that fire tested and refined metals, with some surviving heat better than others. Whereas lead melts already at 327°C, the more expensive metal gold melts only at

10. Cf. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 454, regarding eschatological birth-pangs. Qumran texts speak of the righteous tested in God's crucible (1QM 17.1), which is the time of final battle (1QM 17.9; 4Q511 35.1-3).

11. E.g., B.J. Oropeza, *In the Footsteps of Judas and Other Defectors: The Gospels, Acts, and Johannine Letters* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), p. 43. Many proponents cite 1 Pet. 1.7; 4.12 (William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], p. 349) or—in light of Mk 1.2—Mal. 3.2-3 (Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark* [CCSS; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], p. 193). Cf. burning of Christians in Rome (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.4; see introduction). One might also consider self-testing, i.e. judging oneself so one will not need to be judged (1 Cor. 11.28, 31-32; cf. Gal. 6.1).

12. Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, p. 698, citing Isa. 43.2; *Pss. Sol.* 15.4-5; *Sib. Or.* 2.252-254; 1QH 14[6].17-18.

13. If testing fire is in view, it would mean amputating obstacles (9.43-47) so as to avoid the greater salted fire.

14. Cf. Aretaeus, *Cur. diut.* 2.13 (translation from Francis Adams [ed. and trans.], *Aretaeus the Cappadocian: The Extant Works* [London: Sydenham Society, 1856], p. 240), who compares a powerful emetic to fire because of its purgative qualities.

15. Josephus, *Ant.* 3.262.

1063°C.¹⁶ Interestingly, salt (9.49-50) was used as a ‘refining agent in metallurgy’.¹⁷

Many employed the image of metal refining or testing figuratively,¹⁸ whether for the genuineness of friendships,¹⁹ the heart (e.g. Job 23.10; Prov. 17.3; 27.21),²⁰ God’s words (Ps. 12.6)²¹ or God’s people (Ps. 66.10; Isa. 1.25; 48.10; Ezek. 22.18, 20, 22; Zech. 13.9; Wis. 3.5-6; cf. Dan. 11.35; 12.10; Mal. 3.2-3).²²

Or perhaps the thought is that the fire is God’s own presence (Deut. 4.24; Isa. 33.14).²³ In the Old Testament, what was profane could not safely enter the presence of the holy God (e.g. Exod. 19.21-24; 28.43; 30.20; Lev. 10.1-7; Num. 18.3). In this case, those consecrated to God will enjoy his presence eternally, while it will torment the wicked unready for it.

Because 9.49 refers to fiery judgment, the negative dimensions of the salt image might come to the fore there. For example, salt, even in salt water,

16. Marvin R. Wilson, ‘Bellows and Furnaces’, in Edwin M. Yamauchi and Marvin R. Wilson (eds.), *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity* (3 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2014), I, pp. 167-75 (168). Ancient extraction methods were naturally somewhat limited (R.J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* [9 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1955–1964], III, p. 174; A. Lucas, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries* [rev. J.R. Harris; London: Edward Arnold, 4th edn, 1962], p. 229). Philosophic ‘first principles’ as well as empirical observations informed some ancient accounts of metallurgy (Ernesto Paparazzo, ‘Pliny the Elder on Metals: Philosophical and Scientific Issues’, *CP* 103 [2008], pp. 40-54).

17. Forbes, *Studies*, III, p. 174, citing Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 33.109; 33.84; 34.106.

18. In later rabbis, see e.g. *Gen. R.* 44.1 (regarding Abraham); *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 14.6 (quoting Ps. 12.7).

19. Isocrates, *Demon.* 25 (Norlin, LCL).

20. Euripides, frg. 963; Plutarch, *Mor.* 102E (Babbitt, LCL); for courage in the face of hardship, see Seneca the Younger, *Dial.* 1.5.10 (Basore, LCL); Sir. 2.5.

21. Cf. 4Q177 f10–11.1; Philo, *Leg.* 1.77 (wisdom); Philo, *Deca.* 48.

22. Cf. 1QS 4.20; 1QH^a 13.18; 14.11; 4Q174 f1–3.2.4; 4 *Ezra* 16.73; Isaac in *T. Isaac* 8.3. In some passages, the refining continues but nothing is pure enough to survive (Jer. 6.29; Ezek. 22.18-22). Cf. Israel enduring a ‘furnace’ in Egypt (Deut. 4.20; 1 Kgs 8.51; Jer. 11.4).

23. Cf. Exod. 24.17; Deut. 9.3; Pss. 18.8; 97.3; Isa. 30.27, 30. For prior testing, cf. Deut. 4.20.

causes agricultural barrenness;²⁴ after destroying a city, one might thus sow it with salt so that nothing would grow back.²⁵ Salt was herbicidal and could leach precious moisture from the soil. Sowing one's fields with salt would be understood as a sign of madness.²⁶

God turning a well-watered land to salt thus serves as judgment (Sir. 39.23), as in a case such as Sodom.²⁷ Given the connection with both fire and salt (Gen. 19.24-26; Deut. 29.23), the fate of Sodom could well be a source of the allusion here.²⁸ The Gospel tradition elsewhere refers to Sodom (Mt. 10.15; 11.23-24; Lk. 10.12) and its fiery destruction (Lk. 17.28-29)²⁹ and alludes to Lot's wife being turned to salt (Lk. 17:32).³⁰

Saltwater's impotability is why Elisha uses salt to *purify* contaminated water: it is a humanly counterintuitive miraculous action (2 Kgs 2.20-21).³¹ Although salt normally works against fertility,³² it can, in moderate amounts,

24. Philo, *Op. Mund.* 38; 3 *Bar.* 10.9; cf. Philo, *Conf. Ling.* 26.

25. Judg. 9.45; Josephus, *Ant.* 5.248. Salt characterized barren land (Job 39.6; Ps. 107.34; Jer. 17:6; Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 1.192), perhaps sown after destruction (of Moab, Jer. 48:9). For sowing salt as ritually effecting infertility, see F. Charles Fensham, 'Salt as Curse in the OT and the Ancient Near East', *BA* 25 (1962), pp. 48-50 (50).

26. Apollodorus, *Epit.* 3.7; Ovid, *Metam.* 13.34-45, 56-62, 308-312; Libanius, *Encom.* 4.5.

27. See Deut. 29.23; Zeph. 2.9; *Syn. Pr.* 12.61. Sodom 'was turned into a salt heap' (*b. Qidd.* 70a; the translation is from Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* [22 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011]).

28. With Gundry, *Mark*, p. 526; Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, p. 692 (noting that *b. Men.* 21a connects even Lev. 2.13 with Dead Sea salt, called 'Sodom's salt'); noted as one interpretation in Schnabel, *Mark*, p. 229. Salt and the salty Dead Sea are associated with Sodom also in *b. Shab.* 108b; '*Erub.* 17b; *Beṣah* 39a; *Keritot* 6a; *y. Kil.* 9.3, §1 (4a); *Yoma* 4:5 (41a); *Ketub.* 12.3 (35b); cf. 4 *Ezra* 5.7; *y. Sheq.* 6.2 (92a).

29. Luke 17.26-29 may be part of Q (cf. Mt. 24.37-39).

30. For Lot's wife, see Gen. 19.26; Wis. 10.7; Philo, *Fug.* 121; Philo, *Somn.* 1.247; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.203; 1 *Clem.* 11.2. As a pillar of salt, she would not convey corpse-impurity (*b. Nid.* 70a).

31. Cf. Josephus, *War* 4.462-463. Salt could harm the thirsty (*y. Taan.* 4.5 [69b]).

32. Cf. Fensham, 'Salt', p. 50, who says, 'salt is regarded as effecting infertility.'

also stimulate plant growth as a fertilizer,³³ or as an agent that halts fermentation in manure and thus allows its use as fertilizer.³⁴ It is possible that more salt was used for the soil and manure than for food preservation and flavoring.³⁵ If such a figure is in view, it might symbolize what affects the wicked (Mk 9.49) and the righteous (9.50) in contrasting ways.

Salt for Sacrifices

A somewhat more commonly proposed association is the relation between salt and sacrifices.³⁶ Israelites used salt in sacrifices, initially with grain offerings (Lev. 2.13)³⁷ but eventually for bulls and rams as well (Ezek. 43.23-

33. See especially Eugene P. Deatrick, 'Salt, Soil, Savior', *BA* 25 (1962), pp. 41-48 (44-45). Deatrick was former head of a university soils department. Cf. also saltpeter in Ulrich Dämmgen, 'Das "Salz der Erde" ist kein "Salz"', *BN* 151 (2011), pp. 115-21. Cf. salt land's protection from creatures harmful to plants (Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 17.3.29).

34. Deatrick, 'Salt', p. 46. For manure as fertilizer, see e.g. Lk. 13.8; Theophrastus, *Caus. Plant.* 3.6.1-2; 3.9.1-5; Seneca the Younger, *Ep.* 86.17-18; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 17.6.50-55; 17.8.57; 17.46.258-47.260; 18.53.192-194; Fronto, *De Fer Als.* 3.3; Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.7.25; cf. M. Cary and T.J. Haarhoff, *Life and Thought in the Greek and Roman World* (London: Methuen, 4th edn, 1946), p. 109; Naphtali Lewis, *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), p. 133; Karl-Wilhelm Weeber, 'Refuse', in Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (eds.), *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* (22 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2002), XII, pp. 434-35 (434). Cf. also the verbal similarity between *tabbala* ('seasoning') and *zabbala* ('manure') (T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* [London: SCM Press, 1957], p. 132).

35. Deatrick, 'Salt', pp. 46-47.

36. E.g., Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (WBC, 34B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), p. 73; Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, p. 289; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 383; Dschulnigg, *Markusevangelium*, p. 264; Standaert, *Évangile selon Marc*, p. 719; C. Clifton Black, *Mark* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), p. 220. On Egyptian sacrifices, see Arrian, *Anab.* 3.4.4.

37. It was also used in fragrant incense (Exod. 30.35; not LXX). Tradition also later used it to prevent priests slipping on the altar ramp on the Sabbath (*m. 'Erub.* 10.14).

24).³⁸ Ancient Egyptians already burned natron, a form of salt, with incense in aromatic offerings to deities, and they used natron for consecrating statues and temples.³⁹ Mark's language may in fact allude to Lev. 2.13; many sacrifices were roasted in fire, and 'every gift' (παντὸς δώρου) to be sacrificed could correspond to πᾶς in Mk 9.49. The verb ἀλίζω appears in LXX only for sacrifices (in Lev. 2.13) and rubbing a newborn's skin (in Ezek. 16.4). The history of interpretation also supports this association, as the Western textual tradition (esp. D^{it}) introduces a clear reference to Lev. 2.13 into the text itself here.⁴⁰ Temporary cooking as sacrifices may then preclude the eternal fire of Gehinnom (9.43-47).

Potential connections with sacrifice do not preclude other possible associations. Even in connection with sacrifices, many view salt's symbolic func-

38. Eventually birds as well. See further Ezra 6.9; *Jub.* 21.11; 1Q20 10.17; 11Q19 20.13; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.227; 12.140; *T. Levi* 9.14; *m. Zebah.* 6.5; *Mid.* 5.3; *Tamid* 4.3; *t. Yom Tob.* 1.11; *Menah.* 1:16; *Sipra Lev.* 2.13 (53b; Str-B 2.26); *b. Yoma* 19a; *Roš Haš.* 4a; cf. *Jub.* 6.3; 11Q18 f13.1-2; 11Q19 34.10-11; *b. 'Erub.* 104a; *Soṭah* 14b; *Zebah.* 120b; *Menah.* 106b; *Ḥul.* 132b.

39. Forbes, *Studies*, III, pp. 174-75 (suggesting on p. 175 that the Israelite sacrificial salt was also natron).

40. Mark L. Strauss, *Mark* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), p. 414; Darrell Bock, *Mark* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 265 n. 421. Some even regard this as the earliest reading (Wim Hendriks, 'The Case for the Primacy of the Western Text', *EstBib* 72 [2014], pp. 411-36; Audrey Wauters, "'Car tout [homme] au feu sera salé": Un réexamen textuel de Marc 9,49', *BABELAO* 3 [2014], pp. 33-43), but it likely originated as a scribal marginal note (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [New York: United Bible Societies, corr. ed, 1975], pp. 102-3). The earliest extant MSS omit explicit mention of sacrifice (ⲛ ⲃ ⲁ), but sacrifice does appear already in A, and both readings have strong geographic distribution.

tion as purification.⁴¹ Egyptians connected natron, a form of salt, so closely with ritual purification that they linked the terminology for both.⁴²

Another relevant function in relation to sacrifice could be taste (whether in grain offerings or meat),⁴³ akin to sacrifices' pleasant aroma⁴⁴ or to symbolize the covenant.⁴⁵ Fellowship meals often sealed covenants, and even the covenant salt of Lev. 2.13 and Num. 18.19 is in the context of food the leftovers of which are eaten by Levites (Lev. 2.3, 10; Num. 18.17-18).⁴⁶ The only deficiency of an allusion to sacrifice here is that, on the more probable textual reading, sacrifice is not explicit;⁴⁷ neither are other associations of salt, though some associations (such as judgment) derive some force from the context.

41. Methodius, *Symp.* 1.1 (Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall [eds.], *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament—Volume II. Mark* [29 vols.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998], p. 133; cf. Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, p. 692); Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (trans. David E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), p. 101; Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, p. 73; Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 273; Dschulnigg, *Markusevangelium*, p. 264; Bock, *Mark*, p. 265. Its dehydrating function could be used to help drain blood from sacrificial meat (*b. Hul.* 93a) but also to dry hides (e.g. *m. Shab.* 7.2; *Mid.* 5.3; *t. Yom Tob.* 1.11; *b. Shab.* 79a; *Git.* 22a; *Menah.* 21b; *y. Shab.* 7.2 [9b]).

42. Forbes, *Studies*, III, pp. 175–76. For its use in mixtures by cleaning establishments, see p. 176.

43. Cf. *Midr. Ps.* 20.8 (cited in Rikk E. Watts, 'Mark', in G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson [eds.], *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], pp. 111–249 [194]).

44. E.g. Exod. 29.18, 25, 41; Lev. 1.9, 13, 17; Num. 28.2, 6, 8; Jdt. 16.16.

45. Salt is explicitly connected with covenant in Lev. 2.13; Num. 18.19; *Jub.* 21.11; 11Q19 20.14; cf. 2 Chron. 13.5; *y. Hal.* 4:4 (4a); Watts, 'Mark', p. 194; *Mek. Pesah.* 1.51–57 (see *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* [3 vols.; trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933–1935], I, p. 5) on Exod. 12.1.

46. For salt and bread on the offering table, see Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 2.104; Philo, *Spec.* 1.175; Philo, *Contempl.* 81.

47. Some reject the allusion (Stein, *Mark*, p. 449), not least because it does not address judgment (Gundry, *Mark*, pp. 526–27).

Those who find allusion to sacrifice in Mk 9.49 sometimes also extend the image to the salty believers (9.50) as sacrifices, potential martyrs, for Christ⁴⁸ (cf. Phil. 2.17; Rev. 6.9). No such association is explicit here, but if Mk 9.49 uses the image of sacrifice, it coheres with Mark's depiction of Jesus as a sacrifice (14.24) and the expectation of a new temple (cf. 14.58). But whether as sacrifices or otherwise, believers must be genuinely salty, worthless if lacking peace with one another (cf. 1 Cor. 13.3 [sacrifice without love is worthless]).

Salt as Preservative

Another possible and often proposed⁴⁹ significance of salt is its preservative function, which was paramount in a world without refrigeration,⁵⁰ especially

48. Lane, *Gospel According to Mark*, p. 349, who recalls the amputation imagery of 9.43-47 and Mark's likely setting of persecution (as well as Rom. 12.1); Ian H. Henderson, "'Salted with Fire' (Mark 9.42-50): Style, Oracles and (Socio)Rhetorical Gospel Criticism'. *JSNT* 80 (2000), pp. 44-65; Kim Huat Tan, *Mark* (NCCS; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), p. 131.

49. C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1936), p. 140; A.W. Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 46; Lane, *Gospel According to Mark*, p. 350; Hooker, *Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 233; Ludger Schenke, *Das Markusevangelium: Literarische Eigenart—Text und Kommentierung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005), p. 238; Collins, *Mark*, p. 455; Standaert, *Évangile selon Marc*, p. 720; Black, *Mark*, p. 220; Gyula Vattamány, 'Kann das Salz verderben? Philologische Erwägungen zum Salz-Gleichnis Jesu'. *NTS* 59 (2013), pp. 142-49 (citing *b. Bekh.* 8b; Syriac tradition and the Vulgate). Noting its use on wounds, J. Duncan M. Derrett ('Salted with Fire. Studies in Texts: Mark 9.42-50', *Theology* 76 [1973], pp. 364-68) seeks a connection with the amputations in 9.43, 45, 47.

50. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 8.1.35 Pythagoras; Philo, *Op. Mund.* 66; maybe Ep. Jer. 28. For treating wineskins, cf. Aristophanes, *Nub.* 1237; skins generally, Forbes, *Studies*, III, p. 7. On salt for preservation, see Forbes, *Studies*, III, pp. 157-201 (esp. 185-90); John W. Waterer, 'Leather', in Charles Singer *et al.* (eds.), *A History of Technology: The Mediterranean Civilizations and the Middle Ages, c. 700 B.C. to c. A.D. 1500* (8 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), II, pp. 147-87 (149).

for meat.⁵¹ Like smoking and curing, salting desiccates. It follows nature's own model of longevity for dried substances such as nuts.⁵²

This seems to be the understanding of Ignatius already in the early second century: 'Be salted (ἀλίσθητε) in him, lest you be corrupted/rotten (διαφθαρή),' as evident from the stench.⁵³ Salt was viewed as a necessity for life; some rabbis declared, 'The world cannot survive without salt.'⁵⁴ Cooking meat (hence the context's fire) kills bacteria already present, but salt preserves the meat. Relevant to the worms of 9.48, an ancient manual explains that heavily salted meat remains free from moths and worms⁵⁵ (some have also compared the use of salt for pottery kilns, which could offer an even closer case of combining firing and salt.⁵⁶ Salt glazing seems first attested in the German Rhineland ca. 1400,⁵⁷ but salt helps catalyze dung as fuel in traditional Palestinian ovens in a custom probably stemming from a much earlier period).⁵⁸

51. Macrobius, *Sat.* 7.12.2. By ancient standards, flesh became rotten within three days if not salted (*b. Sanh.* 91b).

52. Forbes, *Studies*, III, p. 185.

53. Ign. *Magn.* 10.2 (highlighted in Collins, *Mark*, p. 455). What was eternal was not subject to such decay (Lk. 12.33; 2 Cor. 4.16).

54. Lane, *Gospel According to Mark*, p. 350 (citing Sop. 15.8).

55. Forbes, *Studies*, III, pp. 189-90, noting detailed instructions in Cato, *Agr.* 162.

56. Joseph Duponcheele, "'Car chacun sera salé au feu ...' (Mc 9,49-50)", *RTL* 39 (2008), pp. 67-79.

57. Sara D'Souza, 'How to Do Salt Glazing', *The Spruce Crafts: Create, Craft, Collect*, <https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/how-to-do-salt-glazing-4147659>; John Demer, 'A Short History of Salt Glazing', *John Dermer OAM—Australian Potter: Kirby's Flat Pottery, Yackandandah*, <http://www.johndermer.com.au/a-short-history-of-salt-glazing>. Reacting with silica in the clay pots, salt forms sodium silicate to glaze the pots.

58. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh (*Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], p. 50) suggest 'an outdoor, earthen oven' using salted dung for fuel; salt plates functioned as a catalyst to make dung burn (Lk. 14.34-35) but exhausted salt plates no longer could fulfill this function (see also John J. Pilch, *The Cultural Dictionary of the Bible* [Liturgical Press, 1999], p. 4; John J. Pilch, 'Salt for the Earthen Oven Revisited', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67 [2011], article #826).

Philo, commenting on Lev. 2.13, notes that salt is used to preserve bodies (thinking of meat) just as the soul preserves bodies from being corrupted/destroyed (διαφθείρεσθαι), and the presence of each in some sense makes them immortal.⁵⁹ Of course, the immortality of salt-dried flesh differs from the original form: Galen warns that bodies inclined to be dry, such as hares, can look mummified when salted or pickled.⁶⁰ Egyptians used natron salt as an agent in desiccating bodies for mummification,⁶¹ and ancient authors often compare curing fish with preserving human bodies.⁶²

The preservative aspect of salt may have an important function in a context where fire is unquenchable, worms are undying (9.48), and believers need to be protected when tested by fire (9.50).⁶³ The context already speaks of the resurrection of the righteous (9.43, 45, 47), but a resurrection body is also presupposed for the wicked so they can experience the fire and worms without being consumed immediately (or ever, depending on one's understanding of the relevance of οὐ τελευτᾷ and οὐ σβέννυται in 9.48).

Many of Jesus' original disciples were surely familiar with fish salting⁶⁴—and roasting—around the lake of Galilee (cf. 9.33, 42). Although it would

59. Philo, *Spec.* 1.289; see the same point in Philo, *Op. Mund.* 66.

60. Galen, *Alim. Fac.* 3.40, K.746. On salt and dryness, cf. also Plutarch, *Quaest. nat.* 5; Plutarch, *Mor.* 913DE; for salt blistering and drying skin, see Celsus *Med.* 2.33.1; cf. salt's ability to absorb moisture in Udo Schnelle, Manfred Lang and Michael Labahn (eds.), *Texte zum Markusevangelium: Texte zum Neuen Testament aus Griechentum und Hellenismus* (Neuer Wettstein, 1/1.1; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), p. 468 (on Pseudo-Aristotle, *Probl.* 927a35-927b5).

61. Forbes, *Studies*, III, pp. 176, 190; on mummification, see Forbes, *Studies*, III, pp. 190-96 (noting on p. 192 the Egyptian preference for natron, given its ritual value). In contrast to drying to preserve corpses, decomposing flesh also leaves dry bones (cf. Ezek. 37.4, 11). See also comments on fish salting below.

62. Forbes (*Studies*, III, pp. 189-90) notes that the Greek root *ταριχ-* applies to salting, pickling and embalming; many authors applied it to both fish curing and human embalming (Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.85, 88; 4.53; Diodorus Siculus 1.3; Athenaeus 3.116-121). Lucian also describes Egyptian mummification as salting (*Luct.* 21).

63. Ancients already knew that they could secure salt by burning natural brines (Forbes, *Studies*, III, p. 163, citing esp. Pliny the Younger and Tacitus *Ann.* 13.57).

64. On salted fish, see e.g. Varro, *Rust.* 3.17.7; *Ling.* 7.47; Strabo, *Geogr.* 3.4.2; Columella, *Rust.* 8.17.12, 14; Plutarch, *Quaest. con.* 1.626E; see also discussion at Mk 1.16-17. On salt as a remedy, see e.g. Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 32.17.45-47; 32.26.80; 32.34.107-108; see also PSI 4.413 (Thomas E. Grafton, 'Health and Healing in the

probably press the analogy too far to view the righteous with salt in themselves as saltwater fish (the Mediterranean has much higher salinity than the ocean) as opposed to unsalty freshwater fish (as in the lake of Galilee; cf. 1.17), peace with one another protects the righteous (9.50).

Despite my earlier contention that taste ‘might be the most obvious function to Galilean men who would constitute Jesus’s primary audience’,⁶⁵ preservation may have been equally or even more obvious for Jesus’ disciples who were fishermen, given the fish-salting industry in nearby Magdala⁶⁶ (on fish-salting, see comment at Mk 1.16-20). Fish spoil quickly without the preservation processes that in antiquity included salting.⁶⁷ The weakness of any allusion to fish salting here is that Mark’s literary context does not provide clearer cues (fish have not appeared since 6.43 and 8.7), even though Mark’s audience would lack the environmental cues of Jesus’ original setting here. The problem with viewing salt as protection from fire is that ‘salted *with fire*’ seems an unusual way to speak of protection—as if the salt itself is fiery, dehydrating the resurrected flesh of the damned.

Documentary Papyri: A Comparison with the Healing Texts in Luke–Acts’ [PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2017], p. 65).

65. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 173. For taste, see Forbes, *Studies*, III, p. 174.

66. On which, see e.g. Mendel Nun, *The Sea of Galilee and its Fishermen in the New Testament* (Kibbutz Ein Gev: Kinnereth Sailing, 1989), p. 51; Stefano De Luca and Anna Lena, ‘Magdala/Taricheae’, in David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange (eds.), *The Archaeological Record from Cities, Towns, and Villages* (Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods, 2; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 280-342 (283, 288, 309); Richard Bauckham, ‘Magdala as We Now Know It: An Overview’, in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *Magdala of Galilee: A Jewish City in the Hellenistic and Roman Period* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), pp. 1-67 (5, 49-50); Bauckham, ‘Magdala and the Fishing Industry’, pp. 185-267 (253); David A. Fiensy, *The Archaeology of Daily Life: Ordinary Persons in Late Second Temple Israel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), p. 53.

67. David A. Fiensy, *Christian Origins and the Ancient Economy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), p. 17; Ze’ev Safrai, ‘Urbanization and Industry in Mishnaic Galilee’, in David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange (eds.), *Life, Culture, and Society* (Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods, 1; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), pp. 272-96 (284); Bauckham, ‘Magdala and the Fishing Industry’, pp. 244-48.

Eating and Salt

As already suggested in connection with sacrifice, others emphasize salt as a flavoring agent,⁶⁸ as is almost certainly the sense in Col. 4.6.⁶⁹ Taste would seem quite relevant in the Q version (Mt. 5.13; Lk. 14.34), if, as is normally argued, in Greek *μωπαίνω* can mean ‘become tasteless’ (relevant to salt).⁷⁰ It would then offer a ready-made pun with the verb’s dominant meaning in ancient sources outside our saying (see LSJ): in the passive it can also mean, ‘become foolish’ (Sir. 23.14 LXX; Isa. 19.11; Jer. 10.14; 28.17 [ET 51.17]; Rom. 1.22; 1 Cor. 1.20).⁷¹

68. E.g. Schweizer, *Good News According to Matthew*, p. 101.

69. Colossians 4.6 addresses gracious speech. For Col. 4.6, some cite rabbinic idiom for wise instruction (Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], p. 128); a Colossian audience would not know rabbinic idiom, but it might reflect a wider usage. For wit, see Cicero, *Fam.* 7.32.1; *Att.* 1.13.1; Plutarch, *Quaest. con.* 5.10.2; *Mor.* 685A (Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* [trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], p. 168 n. 39). For Mk 9.50 referring to speaking wisely, see Gregory the Great, *Reg. past.* 4.12.

70. Perhaps carried over from an Aramaic wordplay (see Hagner, *Matthew*, I, p. 99); cf. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 2nd rev. edn, 1972), pp. 168, 217. English translations have moved away from speaking of salt losing its ‘savor’ (Mt. 5.13; Lk. 14.34, KJV, ASV) to speaking of losing its taste (ESV, NASB, NET, NRSV) or (more neutrally) saltiness (NIV); for the history of this development, see Mikeal C. Parsons and D. Thomas Hanks, ‘When the Salt Lost its Savour: A Brief History of Matthew 5.13/Mark 9.50/Luke 14.34 in English Translation’, *BT* 52 (2001), pp. 320–26.

71. Vattamány (‘Kann das Salz verderben?’) suggests an original Aramaic expression for ‘become weak’, first rendered into Greek as *μωπαίνω*, a verb that means ‘pass away, perish’ (Job 15.30 LXX; 24.24; Wis. 2.8; Jas 1.11; flesh in fire, Wis. 19.21).

Salt appears regularly in connection with food, flavor and seasoning in ancient sources,⁷² including in specifically nutritional⁷³ and culinary⁷⁴ contexts. For example, one might dip olives in salt⁷⁵ or dip bread in saltwater for seasoning.⁷⁶ Along with water⁷⁷ or bread,⁷⁸ salt was considered a basic necessity. Job asks (6.6) whether what is tasteless can be eaten without salt. A later apocalypse complains that even a king's fine banquet would be shamed without salt.⁷⁹

Taste could fit 9.50 but hardly fits 9.49 unless we envision the fate of the damned as a sweet-smelling sacrificial fragrance to God, for which we would want more explicit clues. Alternatively, salt could season the damned for the consumption of the worms (salt is destructive to normal worms but so is cooking). If Mt. 5.13/Lk. 14.34-35 is envisioned as taste but Mk 9.49 is not, we might think of 9.49 as an awkward transition created by Mark to link 9.48

72. E.g. Homer, *Il.* 9.214; Homer, *Od.* 23.270; Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.3.18; 16.4.12; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 5; *Mor.* 352F; 669B; 913C; *Quaest. con.* 4.4.3; *Quaest. nat.* 5; Ezra 6.9; 7.22; Philo, *Somn.* 2.210; *m. 'Erub.* 3.1; 7.10; *Ned.* 6.3; *m. Soṭah* 1.5; *Tebul Yom* 1.3-4; in dough, e.g. *m. Beṣah* 5.4; in meat, *b. Pesah* 76a. It was ideal even in animal fodder (Isa. 30.24, MT only; Plutarch, *Quaest. nat.* 3; *Mor.* 912DF). Those who abstained from salty seasoning, such as Egyptian priests (Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], p. 90, citing Plutarch, *Mor.* 729A) or Numidians (Sallust, *Bell. Jug.* 89.7), were deemed noteworthy.

73. Galen, *Alim. Fac.* 1.4, K.494 (averring that the healthiest bread was the most heavily salted!); 1.7, K.499; 1.9, K.502; 3.14, K.683; 3.14, K.684-685; 3.29, K.726; 3.40, K.746; contrast Plutarch, *Quaest. nat.* 5; *Mor.* 913B. It is among foods thought to heat the body (Celsus, *Med.* 2.27.1). Salt was also used in medicines (Celsus, *Med.* 4.6.3-4; 8.10.7; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 31.45.98-105; medicine with angel invocation, *t. Sol.* 18.34)—as was, admittedly, almost anything else.

74. Over 180 times in Apicius, *De Re Coquinaria* (e.g. recipe 231).

75. *m. Ma'as.* 4.3.

76. *m. Shab.* 14.2. But salty water contrasts with what is drinkable (Theophrastus, *Caus. plant.* 2.6.3-4); it can be useful as an emetic (Celsus, *Med.* 1.3.22).

77. E.g. Sir. 39.26; *m. 'Erub.* 3.1; *Bek.* 4.9; *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 51b.

78. Philo, *Contempl.* 37, 73, 81. Cf. the Middle Eastern expression in Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 123.

79. Apoc. Sedr. 1.4.

with 9.50; but its very awkwardness should count against its function as a transition ('and he said' would work far better).

Perhaps influenced by Col. 4.6, and especially *μωραίνω* in Mt. 5.13//Lk. 14.34, some interpret salt here as wisdom⁸⁰ or the gospel;⁸¹ readers of Mt. 5.13 would naturally think of believers themselves.⁸²

Salt could also relate to fellowship meals, covenant meals, and covenant more generally.⁸³ God gave David the kingdom with a covenant of salt (2 Chron. 13.5; cf. also Lev. 2.13; Num. 18.19).⁸⁴ Salt can function as a metonymy for table fellowship.⁸⁵ Sharing salt expressed sharing a meal, which

80. Gregory the Great, *Reg. past.* 4.12 (Oden and Hall, *Mark*, p. 126). Cummeanus 9.48-50 (Michael Cahill [ed. and trans.], *The First Commentary on Mark: An Annotated Translation* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], p. 78) finds the salt of wisdom in 9.48, the corruption of those who love being in charge in 9.49 and salt as correction in 9.50. Cf. Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 217. Using a Latin wordplay, Cicero, *Fam.* 7.32.1 (Henderson, LCL) uses 'salt-pits' to represent his source of wit. Rabbis compared the Torah to salt (Str-B 2.27 [ET], citing Sopherim 15.8)—as well as to many other things!

81. C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, rev. edn, 1966), p. 316.

82. E.g. L. Aalen, 'Lysets begrep i de synoptiske evangelier', *SEA* 22-23 (1957-1958), pp. 17-31; Schweizer, *Good News According to Matthew*, p. 101.

83. See also Schweizer, *Good News According to Matthew*, p. 101; David E. Garland, *Mark* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 370; Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, p. 289; Schnelle, Lang and Labahn (eds.), *Texte zum Markusevangelium*, p. 472; esp. M. Eugene Boring, Klaus Berger and Carsten Colpe (eds.), *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 177 (§241); Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, p. 693.

84. See e.g. Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 71; Roy E. Gane, 'Leviticus', in John H. Walton (ed.), *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament* (5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), I, pp. 284-337 (292; including here Ezra 4.14).

85. Philo, *Ios.* 196, 210; on the possible figure in Acts 1.4, cf. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 291. For metonymy in ancient rhetoric, see *Rhet. Her.* 4.32.43; Galen O. Rowe, 'Style', in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period, 330 B.C.-A.D. 400* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 121-57 (126) (including the sharing of salt in Demosthenes, *Fals. leg.* 19.189). Salt can thus express getting to know one another (Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 8.1156.2). Boring, Berger and Colpe (eds.), *Hellenistic*

establishes a covenant relationship.⁸⁶ Table-fellowship invited covenant relationship among those who shared it.⁸⁷ For example, those who have eaten together should behave as friends and avoid slandering each other.⁸⁸ It was thus appropriate as a metaphor for peace,⁸⁹ fitting the concluding line of Mk 9.50.

Losing Saltiness

If the *ἐάν* + the subjunctive in 9.50 (*ἐάν δὲ τὸ ἅλας ἀναλον γένηται*, ‘if the salt becomes unsalty’) is parallel to the *ἐάν* + the subjunctive in 9.43, 45, 47 (‘if ... causes you to sin’), it indicates sin, perhaps implying terminal apostasy. But how does the image of salt losing saltiness function? Technically, table salt (sodium chloride) is chemically stable and so does not stop being salt; it can disintegrate, but it does not decompose.⁹⁰ As scholars often point out, however, typically emphasizing saline deposits around the Dead Sea⁹¹ (the ‘salt sea’),⁹² Jesus was referring to salts naturally available in his region, not to pure sodium chloride.⁹³

Commentary, p. 177 (§241), who cite *Eth. nic.* 8.3 and *Eth. eud.* 7.2.26. Thus, one character in a story ‘shared salt’ with his fellow-travelers (Lucian, [*Asin.*] 1).

86. Philo, *Spec.* 3.96; *Praem. Poen.* 154; *Somn.* 2.210. Does the king’s supply of salt in Ezra 4.14 express covenant relationship?

87. See e.g. *Jub.* 35.27; 45.5; discussion in Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), II, p. 913; hospitality created friendly ties even with strangers (Euripides, *Cycl.* 125) and could even reconcile enemies (Plutarch, *Cic.* 26.1).

88. Aeschines, *Fals. leg.* 22, 55.

89. See especially—though not using the term *εἰρήνη*—Philo, *Contempl.* 41; *Praem. Poen.* 154.

90. Deatrick, ‘Salt’, pp. 41–43 (including ‘Palestinian salt’).

91. Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 169; Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1976), p. 239; Hooker, *Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 233; Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark* (Believers Church Bible Commentary; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), p. 229; Stein, *Mark*, p. 450. Cf. also salt marshes (Ezek. 47.11).

92. Gen. 14.3 (cf. Philo, *Conf. Ling.* 26); Num. 34.3, 12; Deut. 3.17; Josh. 3.16; 12.3; 15.2, 5; 18.19; *Jub.* 13.22; 1Q20 16.17.

93. Deatrick, ‘Salt’, pp. 43–44.

Thus others also spoke of such salt losing its flavor.⁹⁴ Much of the salt geologically available in greater Judea included a mixture of compounds, including carnallite and gypsum.⁹⁵ Dampness could leech away the sodium chloride from a mixture.⁹⁶ A soils chemist thus notes, ‘the loss of a salty taste might either be due to actual loss of sodium chloride or to the masking of its taste by gypsum.’⁹⁷

For others, Jesus refers to a more graphic, inconceivable situation of real salt losing its taste.⁹⁸ But even had ancients not been familiar with a sort of ‘salt’ that had stopped being salty, the image ‘unsalty salt’ communicates the idea of something useless.⁹⁹ A story from a rabbi a generation after Mark and two generations after Jesus’ ministry underlines the point. When asked how one could salt unsalty salt, he replied, ‘With the afterbirth of a mule’.¹⁰⁰ In antiquity, everyone would catch the point: as half-breeds,¹⁰¹ mules are

94. Various scholars (Lane, *Gospel According to Mark*, p. 350; Davies and Allison, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, I, p. 473; Garland, *Mark*, p. 370 n. 7; R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark* (SHBC; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), p. 318; Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, p. 692) cite Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 31.34.67; 31.44.95; *m. Sotah* 9.15; *b. Bekh.* 8b. Cf. Sigvard Hellestam, ‘Mysteriet med saltet’, *SEÅ* 55 (1990), pp. 59–63: boiling seawater too far, one could accidentally yield magnesium salt along with one’s cooking salt; the former tasted bitter and was valuable only for holding down weeds and dust on roads.

95. Deatrick, ‘Salt’, p. 42; I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 596.

96. Deatrick, ‘Salt’, p. 42.

97. Deatrick, ‘Salt’, pp. 43–44.

98. Cf. David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 115; Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 83.

99. Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, p. 693. Thus, cf. Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 172–73, regarding the parallel with concealed light in Mt. 5.14–15 (though Mark includes the idea in his parables passage instead [Mk 4.21]; Matthew himself may have separated Q material—cf. Mt. 5.15; 6.22 with Lk. 11.33–36).

100. *b. Bekh.* 8b, noted also by Gustaf Dalman, *Jesus–Jeshua: Studies in the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 229; Manson, *Sayings*, p. 132; Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1987), p. 82; Vermes, *Religion*, p. 83.

101. Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 8.69.171–175; Babrius, *Fables* 62 (Perry, LCL).

sterile¹⁰² and thus produce no afterbirth. There is no point in trying to resalt (some hypothetical) salt that was no longer salty; it is worthless, so save your new salt for whatever your old salt might have seasoned.

Some earlier commentators saw Jesus as characterizing Israel or Judaism in these terms,¹⁰³ but the message seems more pointed. Just as tasteless salt lacks value, so does a professed disciple who fails to genuinely prove a disciple.¹⁰⁴ So far, disciples were failing to be at peace with one another (9.34); what would they do when they risked apostasy (14.50-52)?

Conclusion

Given salt's wide range of functions in antiquity, it seems precarious to limit the image's relevance prematurely. All the background examined above is *possible* in their ancient context. These functions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, some nuances seem more directly relevant to the passage's specific literary context than others. Nuances of sacrifice (especially in 9.49) and taste (perhaps in 9.50) may well be present. The problem with most proposals is finding a background that fits well both 9.49 and 9.50, which may both reflect dominical sayings but fit only awkwardly together.

The matter thus remains debatable. But given Mark's placement of the two sayings together and their context in Mk 9, the preservative function of salt might be particularly dominant here. This preservation function might combine with salt's use in sacrifice and cooking to relate to the preservation of

102. E.g. Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 2.8; 747b.12-16; Livy 26.23.5; Aelian, *Nat. an.* 12.16 (noting Democritus); Appian, *Bell. civ.* 1.9.83; 2.5.36; Sifre Deut. 119.2.3; *Gen. R.* 41.6. Cf. also J.C. McKeown, *A Cabinet of Ancient Medical Curiosities: Strange Tales and Surprising Facts from the Healing Arts of Greece and Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 225. Noting rare exceptions, see Donna Campbell Smith, *The Book of Donkeys: A Guide to Selecting, Caring, and Training* (Guilford, CT: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 109-10; ancients viewed these as omens (Remus, *Conflict*, 29; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 8.69.173; Appian, *Bell. civ.* 1.9.83; 2.5.36).

103. Manson, *Sayings*, p. 132; Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 142. Cf. Str-B 1.236 on *b. Bekh.* 8b (as noted in Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 169); many commentators on Mk 2.21-22.

104. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 140; Argyle, *Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 46.

resurrection bodies—possibly those of the damned burning in Gehinnom (9.43-48) and especially (and significantly more likely) for the preservation of the righteous tested by fire. Ultimately, Mark may envision especially the salt of peace preserving the righteous when they come to the fiery eschatological test of judgment day.